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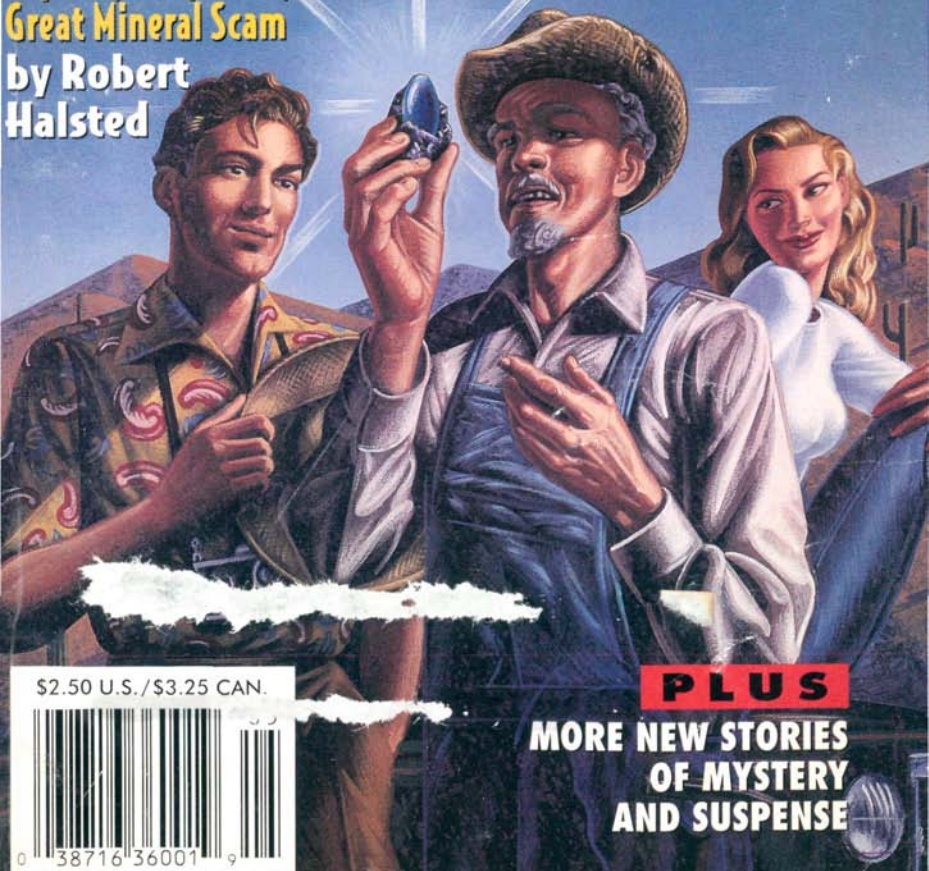
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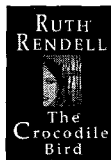
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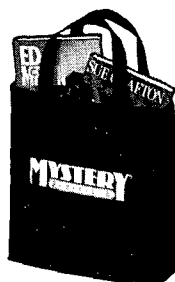
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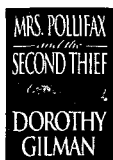
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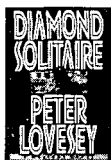
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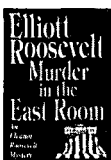
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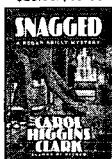
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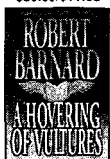
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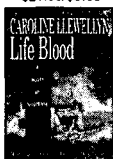
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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

INTENSITY by Bob Tippee	6
SUICIDE JOCKEYS by James Lundquist	28
CROSSCURRENTS AND EDDIES by Stephen Wasylyk	38
DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION IN OZ by Alan Gordon	56
THE MULESHOE CAPER by Robert Halsted	76
LICENSE TO KILL by Jeffry Scott	112
FOUR OF A KIND by Robert Lopresti	136

MYSTERY CLASSIC

ON THE BRIGHTON ROAD by Richard Middleton	147
--------------------------------------------------	------------

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	75
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling	109
SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED"	135
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	152
MURDER BY DIRECTION by William Heller	155
THE STORY THAT WON	157

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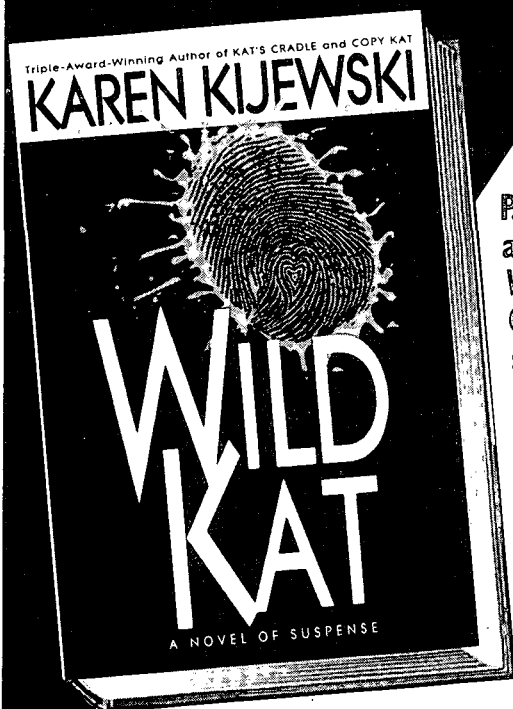
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

We like to note milestones around here when we can, and there are two very much worth noting in this issue. Stephen Wasylyk's story "Crosscurrents and Eddies" is his one hundred twenty-fifth story to be published in AHMM, and Jeffry Scott's "License to Kill" is his fiftieth AHMM story.

Wasylyk's first tale, "The Loose End," was published in our April 1968 issue; Scott's first story, "Invisible Clue," appeared in December 1976.

All this is certainly AHMM's good fortune. We are grateful to both authors for their loyalty over the years and for their unflagging excellence as writers. For many years we have been as entertained by them as our readers have been and look for-

ward to each new story that comes in the mail.

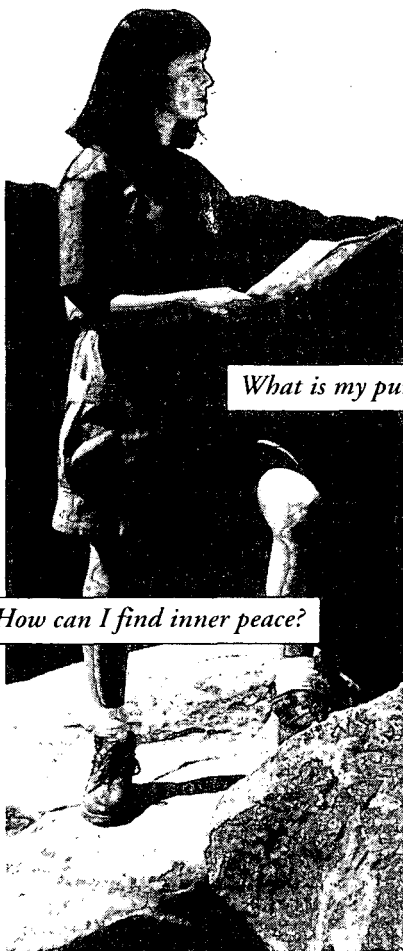
We missed another milestone, though, and there's a good bit of gnashing of teeth around here about that. Those of you who pay attention to awards in the mystery fiction field might have noticed that in 1993 Margaret Maron accomplished the unprecedented feat of winning the Edgar, the Anthony, the Agatha, and the Macavity awards for Best Novel with *The Bootlegger's Daughter*. We noticed that, too, and were pleased for her, but we didn't know, until we read an article by Carolyn Hart in the December issue of the *Sisters in Crime Newsletter* (kindly sent to us recently by Jan Burke), that 1993 also marked Ms.

(continued on page 108)

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FICTION

INTENSITY

by
Bob Tippee

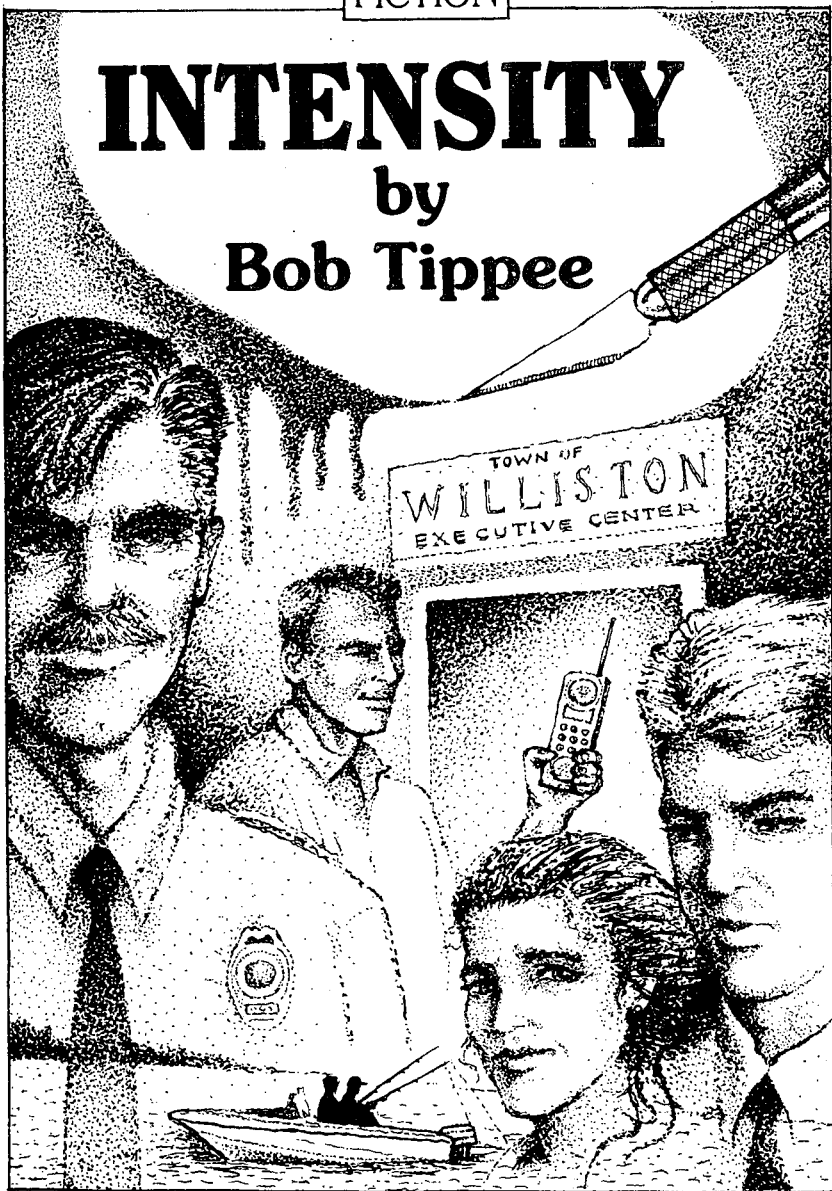


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His Honor Doug Bagley, mayor of Williston, wedged his fat butt into one of two tattered visitors' chairs in front of my desk and glowered at the trim man sitting next to him.

"Mr. Voss," he said, "can I talk direct?"

Alan Voss did not have to be asked. In addition to tan chinos, a navy polo shirt, and Dock-Siders with no socks, he wore the hard-eyed stare of someone who knew the difference between direct talk and the other kind. He nodded.

His Honor's wind-reddened jowls jiggled, and pudgy fingers tried in vain to rake wiry grey curls back over his bald spot. "It's like this: ex-convicts don't investigate murders in my town."

I had briefed Doug during the short drive between shiny new Williston Executive Center and my dingy office behind the Municipal Building. Fifteen months of a five year sentence for some sort of securities violation. Alan had been a high-rolling investment banker in New York—too high-rolling, I guess. He also had smarts like nobody else in our cosy Ozark resort town, which is why I had asked him to meet me here.

"Fine," Alan said, starting to stand. "I've got a marina to run."

I waved him back into his chair. "Doug, as long as I'm the only cop you've got room for in the budget, I've got to be able to recruit help as I see fit."

"The sheriff's office—"

"Worked the scene," I said. "No help with an investigation. You know that. Hadn't been for Alan here, we'd have never figured out how to bust up that boat theft operation last spring."

"We're beholden," His Honor said, nodding toward Alan. "And the good Lord knows it took brains to turn that tumbledown marina into a money-maker. But this is murder, and not just any murder. This is murder of the first tenant of Williston's first top-drawer office center. And I'll tell you something you probably don't know: we're talking to three national corporations—that's national corporations, Guy. One of 'em's damn near ready to lease the Executive Center's whole second floor. Do you know how this'll affect negotiations?" He groaned, tipped his chair back, and palmed sweat off three chins.

I said, "Guess you'll have to cancel Denton Brooks's testimonial on what a great place Williston is."

At least it made him set my chair's front legs back on the

floor. "The man's dead, for Christ' sake."

"First thing I noticed about him," I said. His Honor was thinking about letting Alan help with the investigation; I could tell. I needed to keep him from saying no because he never reversed himself, even when he was wrong, which was most of the time. "How's the last day of Water Carnival?"

Water Carnival was our traditional ten day celebration of the end of tourist season—and a chance for local politicians to take credit for what other people had worked hard all summer to accomplish.

"Too windy for the boat race finals, so I had to ad lib till the barbecue got done," said His Honor. "I made a speech about everybody there, which was everybody in town except you two."

"And Denton Brooks," I said. "Guess he worked most Saturdays. And Beth Riley. Denton made her work, too, Water Carnival or not. She found the body."

Alan cocked his head and asked, "Anybody else working?"

I shook my head. "Beth was too shook up to make sense. I sent her home, said we'd be by later. All I could make out was that she was on the phone with Matt Hemphill at the time.

He's one of the salesmen. Stopped by the office to check on what the ruckus was before you got there, Doug."

His Honor frowned. "Matt Hemphill. Matt Hemphill . . ."

I didn't want to acknowledge that Williston had a resident whom I hadn't met before that afternoon.

Alan asked, "Couldn't Beth see into Denton's office?"

I nodded. "But she found Denton in an office at the end of a hall where she couldn't see, next to an emergency door. X-Acto knife, ear to ear, clean as you please. Office belongs to Rex Miller. Know him, Doug?"

His Honor exhaled menacingly through his nose. "I haven't given up fishing, for Christ' sake. Everybody on the lake knows Rex Miller."

"This emergency—" Alan began.

"Locked," I said. "Had to be somebody who was already inside when Denton turned off the alarm system today, or somebody who sneaked in the front door after he opened up, or somebody with a key to the emergency door."

"Like an inside job!" His Honor said, almost gleefully.

I glanced at Alan, who looked as puzzled as I felt.

"It'll look a lot better if it's an inside job," His Honor opined. "Not so much like a security

breach, or like Williston's full of murderous drifters. We know who the X-Acto knife belongs to?"

I slid the knife, now in a plastic evidence bag with its blade sheathed in cardboard, from my shirt pocket. "No prints, of course," I said.

"If it belongs to Rex Miller I'd say you've got a suspect," His Honor said.

"Pretty shaky, Doug," I said. "There's no motive."

Alan fidgeted.

"Mr. Voss?" said His Honor.

Alan spoke slowly, as though thinking about every word. "I know Rex pretty well. Just having him pull up at my fuel dock is worth twenty bucks in beer sales. Best fisherman on the lake, and willing to talk about what they're hitting on. People see him coming, they crowd around, buy him beers, ask questions. My snack bar business triples on Rex's regular sales call days."

His Honor asked, "He ever talk about Denton Brooks?"

"Yeah."

"Well?"

Alan took a deep breath. "Rex used to take his customers fishing. I went every chance I got just to learn stuff I could pass on to my own customers. Bought more Samson Snacks pretzels and pork rinds than I'll

ever sell, but it's worth it. Then—"

"What?" asked His Honor. "What, for Christ' sake?"

"First Denton made Rex quit fishing on company time. Said it didn't look professional. Then, maybe a week ago, he made Rex and all the other salesmen start carrying portable telephones wherever they went."

"Good business," His Honor said.

Alan leaned back and crossed his arms. "Made Rex feel like he was on a leash."

His Honor slapped his pillowlike thighs. "Sounds like a suspect to me," he said. "But I guess he's halfway to Timbuktu by now." His glance at me was a challenge, like why wasn't I halfway to Timbuktu myself in pursuit?

"No answer when I called him," I said seriously.

Alan said, "He stopped by my place for a sandwich and gas about lunchtime. He was heading up the Roaring Creek branch, staying out till nine or ten."

His Honor grunted and said, "He's a fool to be out in that wind."

I took my best shot. "So I guess there'll be no problem with Alan's helping me out on this."

His Honor didn't seem to hear. "The state's new special investigations team'll jump all over this case."

I groaned. "I'll be up to my ass in paperwork."

A fat fist smacked determinedly against a fat palm. "We've got to look like we're in control of the situation."

"Best thing we could do is get a quick arrest," I said.

His Honor smiled. "So you think it's an inside job?"

I was willing to think anything to keep the state pencil-pushers out of my hair. "Hunch," I said.

His Honor stood, "I'm thinking it'd look panicky, me calling for state help right off. And it'd look real good, us solving this problem on our own. So bring the murderer or his booking papers to my office first thing Monday morning. Otherwise, I call the state."

"But, Doug—" I began.

Alan jumped up. "That's plenty of time. Thanks for the confidence, Mr. Mayor," he said, extending a hand.

Returning the handshake, His Honor said, "Our fees haven't gone up since those boat heists this spring. How come you're so eager to help?"

Alan shrugged. "I owe Guy. I need to sell beer to make the marina work, and ex-cons don't exactly get special treatment

when the state hands out liquor licenses."

His Honor snapped his head toward me. "How in the—" Then he squinted. I didn't say anything. "Never mind," he said. "I don't want to know."

It was five in the afternoon when I wheeled Williston's one and only police car into the gravel driveway of Beth Riley's white frame house. Beth lived on a street near downtown, where pines and oaks grew thick and tall and everyone had a garden. Alan and I had checked Rex Miller's boat slip, seen it was empty, and decided we had time to visit Beth and Samson Snacks's two other salesmen before Rex returned from fishing—if that's where he was.

"I'm sorry I couldn't talk before," Beth said when she opened the door and waved us inside. She wore tight blue-jeans and a baggy sweatshirt with "Samson Snacks" on the front and looked younger than she had in her business skirt and blouse. "It was such a shock."

She led us in to her tiny living room, which had an oval rug atop a wood parquet floor, polished antique furniture, a wide-screen television, and four copies of *Sports Illustrated* fanned atop an expensive-look-

ing coffee table. Somebody told me that she had been married once, in St. Louis or Kansas City or some godawful place like that.

After I explained Alan's role in the investigation, Beth took an overstuffed chair across from the television and gestured us toward a sofa facing her. I could smell meat cooking, roast probably.

"Well then," she said, pressing her palms against her thighs just behind the knees. "Mr. Brooks—" Her lips began to quiver.

"It was a shock," I acknowledged.

"I'll be all right," she said, clearing her throat. "Mr. Brooks had a presentation to make in St. Louis—Samson Snacks headquarters, you know."

I didn't but nodded anyway.

"He asked me to work, even though it was Saturday."

"He do that a lot?" Alan asked, a little sharply.

She glanced at him and shrugged. "Occasionally. I wouldn't say a lot. Would you like tea?"

I shook my head. "You were saying—"

"Well then, of course I hated missing the last day of Water Carnival, but Mr. Brooks—well, I'd do anything he

asked me to, you know." Eyes closed, she shook her head.

"You understand," I said, "me and Alan got to have some idea of what happened."

She inhaled deeply and blinked her eyes dry. "Of course. Well then, I was typing the fourth—no, it was the fifth draft of Mr. Brooks's presentation. He was in his office. I got a call, a Mr. Greenway. He said he was thinking of opening a business in Williston, a restaurant, and needed to know about our products and prices. He said he had written to us, which he had; I remember the letter. The restaurant was to be on the lake, so I had given the letter to Mr. Miller. Businesses adjacent to the lake are Mr. Miller's territory, don't you see. Plus a mile inland."

"Rex Miller," I said.

Beth nodded and cleared her throat. "Mr. Cunningham—Larry Cunningham, that is—handles everything east of Highway 39, including Williston, not in Mr. Miller's territory. Mr. Hemphill has everything west."

"Not much west," Alan noted.

"Mr. Hemphill is our top salesman, though," Beth said with a sneer. "Aggressive. Pushy, if you ask me."

"Never met him till this afternoon," I admitted. "Larry

Cunningham I know from bingo at Holy Founders." That's where I knew Beth from, too. "So about today—"

Beth explained why I hadn't before met Matt Hemphill. "Mr. Hemphill works all the time, nearly always on the road. He's more often in Hallford, Perceful, Richmond Ferry, someplace like that than Williston. Except today. He went to the Water Carnival. And a good thing, too.

"After Mr. Greenway called, Mr. Brooks had me call Mr. Miller. We knew he'd be fishing, but he was supposed to have his cellular telephone with him. Apparently he didn't because there was no answer.

"Well then, Mr. Brooks—please don't interpret this to his discredit—had a temper, if you know what I mean. Anyway, what he said about Mr. Miller is between him and his Creator at this point and no business of mine. I'll just say that Mr. Brooks had me get Mr. Hemphill on the phone and tell him to handle the Greenway inquiry."

"And Hemphill was at the lake," Alan said.

Beth nodded. "He had his cellular telephone, just like Mr. Brooks wanted."

Alan leaned forward and asked, "And you're sure he was at the lake?"

"Oh yes. I could hear boats, people cheering. Mr. Hemphill wanted to know what Mr. Greenway's original letter said, so Mr. Brooks went into Mr. Miller's office to find the file. Meanwhile, Mr. Hemphill stayed on the phone with me while he walked up a hill to fetch the product documentation he keeps in that fancy car of his."

"Very efficient," Alan said.

Beth rolled her eyes. "His car's a second office."

I interrupted her. "When did you find the body?"

Beth stiffened at the reminder of her trauma. "It was a little while," she said, rubbing her chin as though to stimulate her memory. "Five minutes maybe. There was a little delay when someone came up to Mr. Hemphill at his car. I could hear them talk. Then Mr. Hemphill had to rummage around in the back seat where he keeps his files."

"The body, Beth?" I asked impatiently.

"Well then, Mr. Hemphill found what he was looking for, and we chatted a while, and when Mr. Brooks didn't return, he asked me to go see what was taking so long. Mr. Brooks is—he was not a man who liked to be pushed, but by then it had been some few minutes, fifteen

or twenty maybe." She clutched her forehead.

I finished for her. "You went looking for Brooks and found him in Rex Miller's office."

She sobbed, closed a hand over her mouth, and nodded, eyes shut and twitching.

"I know what happened after that," I said. "Matt Hemphill, who was still on the line, heard your screams and called my office." I waited until Beth got control. "Any of the salesmen have a reason to kill Denton Brooks, Beth?"

She knitted her eyebrows and sighed.

"I've got to ask," I said.

"Oh, I know," she said. "I was trying to think if there was one of them that will be sad he's dead."

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees.

Beth said, "Mr. Brooks was a difficult man and a demanding boss. Demanding." She shook her head.

Alan said, "That's no reason to kill him."

"Goodness no," said Beth. "But you have to understand, Mr. Brooks liked to maintain a certain tension between the salesmen. He called it intensity. Take Mr. Hemphill. Younger than the others. Always wanting to expand his territory. Mr. Brooks used him as a threat to the other sales-

men. I daresay Mr. Cunningham lived in absolute fear that Mr. Hemphill, an outsider, would get some of his territory. Well then, it would have been a travesty, Mr. Cunningham growing up here, knowing all the merchants and all. But Mr. Brooks liked to keep Mr. Cunningham's intensity level high, don't you see?"

Alan leaned back and crossed his arms. "Is intensity why Denton made Rex Miller quit fishing on the job?"

Beth shook her head. "Mr. Hemphill's idea. He told Mr. Brooks it looked unprofessional."

"And the cellular phones?" Alan asked.

"Mr. Hemphill. How did he put it? 'A giant step into the twentieth century.'"

"Rex know they were Hemphill's ideas?"

"Mr. Brooks never shared credit for his decisions. Mr. Miller didn't like those decisions, I can tell you. He hated the telephones. Looks like he didn't have his with him today. Or maybe—" Her eyes widened. "Do you think—"

"We don't think anything yet," Alan said. "One more question: You seem pretty shaken up by this, but you don't hesitate to criticize Brooks. What exactly was your relationship with your boss?"

Beth didn't hesitate. "I didn't like him, Mr. Voss. But I respected him more than I have ever respected any mortal in this world."

Matt Hemphill met us at the door of his apartment wearing pleated, moss-colored shorts, a grey T-shirt with a Pebble Beach emblem, and molded suede sandals.

"Sorry about the place," he said, waving us inside. "No time to redecorate."

The apartment looked like an ad in one of those flashy magazines that smell like perfume. It had soft, grey carpeting, black leather furniture, chrome and glass tables, paintings of unidentifiable things, and classical music coming from a sound system that occupied an entire wall.

"Last year's model, I guess," I said.

"Lousy deal with Denton," Matt said. "Sit anyplace."

I picked a cone-shaped contraption that was more comfortable than it looked. Alan took a wooden stool in front of a wet bar across from the front door. Matt eased into the leather sofa.

I explained Alan's role in the meeting and asked Matt to describe what he knew about the day's goings-on. His version matched Beth Riley's. He even

bragged about the cellular phones' being his idea and the volume discount he negotiated from Lake Country Communications for their purchase.

When he was done, Alan asked, "Who'll take over the office now that Brooks is dead?"

Matt chuckled. "Looking for motive, are we? Answer's easy: Larry Cunningham. He's the only one that'd want the job. Rex Miller just wants to fish. I'd just as soon serve my time here and make my move when something opens up in headquarters."

I couldn't let that go by. "You'd rather live in St. Louis than Williston?"

"No offense, chief. Williston's not exactly the commercial center of the universe."

"You've done all right here," Alan noted.

"Turned a no-account territory into one of the top ten in the nation and busted ass for every sale. And I don't mind saying I shake things up around the office when I can. Initiative, you know. I want to be something more than division manager of Nowheresville."

Alan swayed on his stool as though intoxicated with Hemphill's ambition. "You don't see Cunningham and Miller as competitors, then?"

Matt chuckled again. "You're kidding. Right?"

"Get along with them?" Alan asked.

Matt shook his head, still chuckling. "Denton liked us to be in each other's faces. I played the game."

"Intensity," I said. Matt nodded.

"Get along with Denton?" Alan asked.

"Nobody got along with Denton. I got what I wanted out of him. That's all I cared about."

"So who'd want Denton dead?" I asked.

Matt turned his palms up. "Somebody he caught in the office? A burglar maybe?"

The apartment building where Matt Hemphill lived was a modern, two-story affair on the edge of town, overlooking the lake. When we left, the sun already flashed off the still-choppy water all the way to the horizon.

"Still time to catch Larry Cunningham before we meet Rex Miller," I said as we clanked down metal stairs. "Or maybe we ought to take a boat out now, just to be sure."

"He's fishing," Alan snapped, and I let it drop.

At Alan's suggestion, we detoured to the covered parking area for residents and found Matt's red Porsche by matching

the parking space and apartment numbers.

"Ought to make life on the road bearable," I said, peering into the plush maroon interior. A box of files and three leather briefcases sat on the back seat.

"He likes baroque," Alan said, pointing to four cassette tapes in the dash recess behind the gearshift console. "That was Vivaldi in his apartment."

He could have fooled me. What mattered was that the files and briefcases confirmed Beth's description of Matt Hemphill's work habits.

As I drove away from the complex toward downtown Williston, I wished I could be as sure as Alan was that Rex would tie up between nine and ten. Alan seemed to be thinking, but I needed to talk.

"Know Larry Cunningham?" I asked.

Alan grunted something I took to mean no.

"Then you probably don't know Flo Cunningham, Larry's mother. I gave her a speeding ticket once. She hired a damn lawyer—loudmouthed Ben Singer over in Stone County—to fight it. Fifty-five in a thirty mile an hour zone over by the shopping center. Of course the judge backed me on the ticket, but Ben got him to cut the fine from fifty bucks to twenty. Flo probably paid him

three hundred dollars. All to make my life miserable."

I waited a minute for Alan to react. He didn't.

"Larry lives with her," I said. "Runs errands for her. Probably cooks for her. You're about to have the pleasure. Just thought I'd warn you."

Alan turned toward me and said, "It could have been like Hemphill said: a screwed-up burglary, somebody trapped in an office, grabbing the nearest weapon, which happened to be Rex's X-Acto knife, getting desperate when Denton came nosing around. But we're acting like we're sure it's an inside job. How come?"

I turned onto Main Street, now a mottle of shadows from yellowing maples along the sidewalk on our right.

"First, we don't know yet if it was Rex's knife," I pointed out, patting the plastic evidence bag in my shirt pocket. "Second, if it wasn't an inside job, if it was some stranger heisting what he thought was an empty office building, there's not a damn thing I could be doing that I'm not doing now. The mayor wants it to be an inside job bad enough to let us work it that way for a day and a half. So we'll work it, and if we don't turn anything up I'll figure it was some drifter and he's long gone, and I'll sleep all right

knowing we did what we could. 'Cause God knows if it wasn't an inside job we'll need all the help we can get from those lardasses in Jeff City. Fair enough?"

For the first time since we'd started making the rounds, Alan laughed. "Just checking," he said.

"Is my Lawrence a suspect?"

Flo Cunningham was a large woman; not fat, just large, with broad shoulders, a full chest, square jaw, hands the size of a man's. Or maybe size was just an impression she created with her fierce brown eyes and roaring voice.

She sat in a deep, blue velvet chair with long mahogany arms. On one side was a carved wood rack full of gardening magazines. On the other side, rigid in a straight-backed dining room chair, sat Larry. He wore his drab-green knit shirt buttoned at the neck and had thinning brown hair and wrinkles in the corners of his timid, jerky eyes.

"For the tenth time, Flo," I said, "Larry's not a suspect. We're just trying to figure out where everybody was when Denton got killed."

Alan and I sat on dining room chairs directly facing Flo. All we had learned was that

Larry had run errands most of the day.

"I think we should call a lawyer," Flo said. "I suppose I could coax Ben Singer out of retirement. Hmmm?" She glowered at me and arched one eyebrow.

"Who?" I asked innocently.

"Please, Mother," Larry seized the moment.

"First I went to the nursery for fertilizer for Mother's garden. The hardware store. Grocery store—Reese's for the produce sale. Let me see: Jim's Texaco after that. Back home."

"And the time for all this?" I asked, jotting in my pocket notebook.

"Left home at ten, ten thirty this morning, I guess. Oh, yes—lunch at the Curbside. I almost forgot."

Flo shifted her girth in the chair. "He was home by three. The murder occurred later, I presume?"

"Between one thirty and two," I snapped.

Alan spoke up. "The Water Carnival would've been a good way to see your customers. How come you didn't go?"

"Matt Hemphill," Larry said, sighing. "Talked all week about going, like he'd lived here all his life. He probably had to ask directions to the lake."

"What does Matt Hemphill have to do with your not going?" I asked.

Larry drew back indignantly. "The man is a pushy braggart. I avoid him. The sooner Samson Snacks moves him along, the better I'll like it."

"With Denton dead," Alan said, "you stand in line to take over the office. Then you could move him along whenever you liked."

Flo snapped a finger toward Alan. "You listen here, young man. I'll not have you making accusations like that with no lawyer present."

"Sorry, ma'am," Alan said with sappy courtesy. "Larry, have you got a girlfriend?"

Flo heaved herself up and stood like a mountain before us. "The nerve!" she roared.

Larry glanced fearfully at his mother. "No," he said. "The nerve. Yes, the nerve."

The sun had disappeared when we returned to the covered private dock where Rex Miller kept his boat. Rex's old red pickup was parked under a tree next to where the plankwalk came ashore.

"Thank God," Alan muttered.

We parked and clattered across the plankwalk to the main dock. It had a dozen slips,

six on each side, with a fish cleaning table at one end. Waves slurped against polystyrene floats beneath the boards under our feet. The wind mixed whiffs of campfire and barbecue with the strong dock smells of gasoline and fish guts.

"Should've picked up a couple of beers," I said, sitting on a wooden locker.

"No need," Alan said. "Here he comes."

I looked up and saw the red and green bow lights of Rex's bass rig bouncing in the waves. In a minute, the flat, metallic blue boat glided into the lights of the dock and turned into the third slip on the left without a bump. Alan and I, standing on opposite docks, caught the gunwales and helped Rex tie up.

When we told him about Denton, he backed against a four by four support beam and slid to a squat.

"My office?" he asked. Rex, who was maybe thirty, kept himself trim but looked older than his years because of what a summer in the sun and a day in the wind will do to a person's face. He wore a Cardinals baseball cap, a loose khaki shirt, and bluejeans.

I showed him the X-Acto knife. "Yours?"

He nodded. "I keep it in the top drawer of my desk. Why?"

He looked at Alan, then back at me. "You don't think—"

"Got to admit it doesn't look too good," I said.

"But I was fishing all day."

"Where at?" Alan asked flatly.

"Brushy Bluff Branch. To get out of the wind and away from the carnival."

"Thought you were heading up Roaring Creek," Alan said.

"Changed my mind."

"Anybody see you?" I asked.

Rex shook his head and looked like he was getting sick.

"Mind you," I said, "I'm not making any accusations. But a man could beach a bass rig like yours below Brushy Bluff where nobody could see it, then hike to that office of yours in—what, five minutes maybe?"

Rex eased himself up and sighed. "Hell, I could've just driven over today and nobody'd have noticed. Whole damn town was at the Water Carnival."

"That emergency door next to your office," I said. "Got a key for it?"

Slowly Rex nodded.

Alan shifted his weight back and forth a couple of times and said, "You and Denton had problems."

"Damn right," Rex said. "Can't say I'm sorry he's dead, but the way it happened stinks."

You ask the others about their problems with Denton? Matt Hemphill didn't like the way Denton ran things, you know. Larry Cunningham lived in fear of the man. Beth Riley knew Denton was making her work weekends just to keep her from slipping over to Perceful with Larry."

"What?" Alan asked.

Rex grinned nervously. "Nobody told you about Larry and Beth? Wouldn't be such a secret if Larry wasn't so scared of his mother."

Alan glanced at me and asked, "Why'd Denton want to spoil things between Beth and Larry?"

"Who knows?" Rex said. "Maybe just to be difficult, to keep the intensity up. Maybe he had ideas about Beth himself. He was single, too, you know. Never knew him to have much time for women, but who knows about a one-way guy like that?"

Alan seemed to have run out of questions, and God knows I had. This new wrinkle would take some figuring out. Meantime, there was a nagging question in the air: was Rex suspect enough to arrest? And with that question came another one: if he wasn't arrested, would he disappear in the night? And a third: if he disappeared, what would people like

His Honor the Mayor say about the Williston police chief?

The first question was mine to answer. And I relied on my best weapon in the fight against crime in Williston: what I knew about the folks who lived there.

I twitched my head toward the live well in Rex's boat and noticed the portable telephone on the console above it. "So'd you catch any or not?" I asked.

"I don't see how come you didn't arrest Rex Miller."

The anger in His Honor's voice came across clearly on the telephone.

"On account of I don't suspect him of anything," I said, leaning back and setting my tired feet atop my desk. It was Sunday afternoon. It had been a long day. I had saved my call to His Honor for what I thought would be the last of it.

"For Christ' sake, Guy, he's your only suspect. It was his office, his X-Acto knife. He was having trouble with Denton. He's got a key to the emergency door."

"Circumstantial," I said.

"But he got as good as caught when Beth tried to call him. You said yourself he had his phone in the boat. Why didn't he answer?"

"Says he never heard it ring," I said.

"And you believe him?"

"Yeah. It was windy as hell. He could've had the ringer set too low."

"Pretty convenient, if you ask me."

I stretched for the advantage. "Did you know Larry Cunningham and Beth Riley are in each other's bloomers?"

His Honor laughed. "Larry Cunningham? Well, good for him. Don't tell Flo."

"Denton didn't like it," I said seriously.

"You mean—"

"Beth looks pretty stern at her desk," I said. "But you ever see her in a bikini with her hair down?"

"Did you?"

"No. But she does all the right things to tight jeans and a T-shirt."

His Honor grunted. "I guess if a man worked around her all the time—"

"And thought about it all the time," I finished for him. "Denton was making things tough for her and Larry. Like making her work yesterday."

"You think it was one or both of them?" he asked.

"Can't be sure it was either."

"What about the other guy, Matt Hemphill?"

"Too young, too big-town for Beth," I said.

"I mean would he kill Denton?" His Honor asked.

"Probably. Only he was on the phone with Beth the whole time it was going on."

"Rex still sounds to me like your best suspect," His Honor said. "I'd feel better if he was in custody."

"Two reasons I don't see it that way," I said. "First is he didn't try to hide the evidence or hightail out of town."

"He didn't hightail yesterday," His Honor said, his voice getting fierce. "Maybe he did today."

Very evenly, I said, "Just talked to him. Alan asked me to call everybody we've talked to, ask them to meet us at your office in the morning."

"Speaking of Alan—"

"Been at the Samson Snacks office all day."

"What's your second reason not to arrest Miller?"

"This morning I traced the errands Larry Cunningham said he went on yesterday. Talked to everybody he talked to. Took everything in the order he described, starting from his place and working out toward the edge of town."

"And?"

"He went everywhere he said he did," I said.

"For Christ' sake, Guy, you haven't got anything."

"I was lollygagging the whole time, stopping and talking to folks. Had a hamburger basket at the Curbside, then a chocolate shake. Ran into old Charlie Dugan at the Texaco. You hear about that bass he caught Wednesday night off Stone Point?"

"Guy, what's *your* point?"

"I was moving slower than Larry and got through in a couple of hours. It took him from ten to three."

"He might have known about the X-Acto knife in Rex Miller's desk," His Honor mumbled.

"Unless—"

"Unless what, Guy?"

"Just one more thing to check out, Doug. See you in the morning."

His Honor beamed. He had his fat butt in his fat leather chair behind his fat mahogany desk with seven of his townfolk seated in folding chairs before him like so many schoolkids. He was presiding. And I have to admit he didn't do a bad job reviewing the facts of the crime, to the extent he knew them.

He started with the facts that incriminated Rex Miller, who squirmed as the case against him built but said nothing. Rex didn't even relax when His

Honor duly noted that he hadn't fled town.

His Honor then mentioned Matt Hemphill's apparent frustrations with Denton Brooks but pointed out that Matt had been on the phone with Beth during the period when the murder must have occurred.

When His Honor turned to Larry, I thought the timid salesman would shrivel up into himself. Flo sat on his right side, Beth on his left, as though by accident. As His Honor talked, Larry's shoulders went from hunched to hunkered.

"I wouldn't bring this up if it didn't have a bearing on the investigation," His Honor said. "We're progressive people here in Williston. But we have reason to believe that Miss Riley and Mr. Cunningham were, well, carrying on, as we used to say."

"Of all the nerve!" Flo roared, jumping to her feet. Then her jaw dropped, and she turned to Larry. "All those errands. Those nights! My Lawrence, a carouser!"

Flo's open right hand followed a route that began somewhere south of her spacious shoulders and ended somewhere to the northwest, intersecting the left side of Larry's face at approximately due north.

"Larry," His Honor asked, "where were you during the couple of hours it didn't take to run those errands Saturday?"

Holding the side of his face and wincing, Larry squeaked, "I—I don't know what you mean?" He glanced at his mother with terror in his eyes, then at Beth, who scowled and folded her arms across her chest.

I said, "Best to say where you were, Larry."

He just kept looking from Flo to Beth and back to Flo, who kept looking from him to Beth and back again.

"All right, then," I said. "I had this hunch yesterday afternoon, thinking about the way you worked your way across town and all. I mean there's nothing past the Texaco station until you get to Richmond Ferry except—"

Flo, who had just eased back into her insufficient chair, exploded again. "Not my Lawrence!"

"Berta Wermer's place," I said. "Now, I think we all know Berta and the rumors about what might or might not go on in those trailers she keeps back off the road a half mile or so. We also know about the contributions Berta makes to the Garden Club, the PTA, the Lions, and naturally, if I thought those girls who live

with her out there—way out there where they never bother anybody—were engaged in anything illegal—"

"Get on with it, Guy," said His Honor.

"The long and short of it is that after we talked—" I nodded to His Honor to make him feel like he was still in charge of things "—I drove on out to Berta's place and had a little chat with her. Seems like somebody who looked a lot like Larry—mind you, Berta's a discreet woman who can't be sure about a thing like this—stopped by, stayed till a little before three."

Flo looked like she might faint. Not Beth. Beth jumped up and hit Larry on the right side of the face even harder than Flo had hit him on the left. Like I said, Beth is a lot fitter woman than she comes across at first, and I hoped for Larry's sake that he could find some way to make peace with her, now that he was no longer either a murder suspect in the law's eyes or a cherub in his mother's.

"Mr. Cunningham," said His Honor, "would you like some ice or something?"

Larry groaned and shook his head. His Honor wrung his hands and frowned. Alan, sitting on the end of the row of chairs to my left, grinned at me

but said nothing. A blue nylon gym bag sat on the floor between his feet. We hadn't talked since Sunday morning, so I didn't know what, if anything, he had learned at Samson Snacks.

His Honor kept things rolling. "Looks to me like we got four folks who might have had reason to do this thing but only two who could've done it."

"I was fishing," Rex blurted.

"I was on the phone with Mr. Hemphill," Beth snapped.

"Mr. Mayor?" Alan raised his hand like a schoolboy. "I think I have an explanation that might be helpful."

"Go on, Mr. Voss."

Alan stood and shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

"Rex," he said, "You got that portable phone of yours?"

I turned toward Rex, who was sitting on my right. His jaw dropped, and his eyebrows wilted. "I—uh—well, to tell you the truth I couldn't find it this morning. Left it in the boat, I guess. Figured it didn't make any difference, though, what with Denton being dead now."

"Or maybe you got rid of it," His Honor said.

Alan stooped and reached into the gym bag. "This it?" he asked, holding up a portable phone.

Rex stared. "Looks like it."

Alan handed the phone to

Rex and said, "One thing that hasn't made sense in all this is the wind."

"The wind?" asked His Honor.

"When Beth was talking with Matt, she heard boats and cheering in the background."

Beth perked up. "The races. They were very clear."

"But they canceled the races," Alan said. "You might have heard a fisherman or two, like Rex here, but not a lot of boats. And nothing would've been clear except somebody speaking directly into the mouthpiece, the way the wind was blowing Saturday."

Rex handed the phone back to Alan. "This is mine," he said. "Where'd you get it?"

"Took it out of your boat last night, Rex. Sorry if you missed any calls. What's your number?"

Rex told him, and Alan asked His Honor to dial the number on his desk phone. Nothing happened.

"Want me to try again?" asked His Honor.

Alan shook his head. "Rex's phone is ringing someplace," he said. "If we found the phone, we'd know who murdered Denton Brooks."

Matt Hemphill chuckled and said, "You mean he used the phone to cut Denton's throat?"

"The murderer didn't want Rex to answer the phone," Alan said. "The murderer wanted to make it look like Rex was away from his phone, out of his boat, when the killing took place."

Alan looked at me and tipped his head toward the door. I stood and shuffled over to it, hand on my .38.

His Honor turned squirmy. "The phone call could have occurred after the murder," he said. "It could have been a cover by somebody who was alone in the office with Denton—"

Beth jumped up. "I didn't kill him! I wouldn't!"

Alan patted the air, motioning her gently to sit. "Let's start with the Greenway letter. It could have been a fake, right?"

Beth shrugged and nodded.

"And the call, too," Alan went on. "The murderer wanted Beth and Denton to make an unsuccessful call to Rex, then have to call Matt Hemphill. The murderer wanted Denton to have to go into Rex's office, next to an emergency door everybody had a key for, looking for the Greenway file."

His Honor blurted, "It all just set up the call to Matt Hemphill, which still could have come after the murder."

"So the question is," Alan said, "did Beth set up the call or somebody else? And if Beth set up the call, why'd she lie about hearing boat races?"

"I heard the races," Beth shrieked. "I did!"

Alan nodded and crossed his arms. "I think you did. Only I think you heard races, and a few open-ended questions, and some conversations staged to buy time, recorded at the Water Carnival last weekend, when the wind wasn't blowing."

"Isn't that stretching things?" His Honor asked.

Alan began pacing in front of His Honor's desk. "Of course, somebody familiar with lake life would have known better than to try to get away with it on a windy day."

Matt Hemphill sat up straight. "I think I resent the implication of that. I was on the phone with Beth."

"Of course you were," Alan said. "But you weren't at the lake. You were parked on Brushy Bluff Road just down from the office building. When you knew Denton was headed for Rex's office to look for the Greenway file, you told Beth you needed to walk to your car. Then you set your portable phone in front of the tape player in that fancy car of yours, turned on the tape of

lake sounds and chitchat you made the weekend before, and ran up to the office to kill Denton. Would've just taken a couple of minutes."

Matt Hemphill snorted and turned sideways in his chair. "That's crazy. Why would I want to kill Denton, anyway?"

"That's what I wondered," Alan said. "Not respecting him as division manager wasn't enough. So I checked his correspondence files yesterday. I found copies of at least twenty memos rejecting your requests for transfer. Judging from your latest memos, Matt, I'd say things were getting ugly between you and Denton. Real ugly."

Matt stood up, and I took a step forward. He froze and said, "You can't prove anything. You say there's a tape of lake sounds. Where is it?"

Alan stooped again and said, "Of course it wouldn't make sense for somebody to use such a tape in a murder and leave it around for somebody else to find. It'd make sense to jerk the tape out of the cassette and pitch it away someplace. Maybe along Brushy Bluff Road, maybe in the trash bin outside your place. Ever notice how those thrown-out tapes are everywhere? Anyway, you can respool them, you know."

He pulled a clear plastic cassette and a small cassette player from the gym bag. "I think you'll find this one particularly interesting."

"It doesn't prove anything!" Matt yelled.

Alan snapped the cassette into the player. "When we get a warrant and look through your apartment, I'll bet we'll find a portable phone that matches this one here, which must be an extra you bought from Lake Country Communications. And I'll bet the one we find rings when we dial Rex's number," he said. "Or maybe in the Porsche. You must've planned to switch phones back as soon as you could. In fact, I'll bet we'll find footprints that match those tailored sandals of yours when we look close around Rex's dock, maybe outside his house. I guess it got scary for you Saturday night, not being able to find that phone."

"I want a lawyer!" Matt boomed.

"Sure," Alan said. "By the way, Matt, why don't you tell us about that last memo Denton Brooks wrote you—the one where he promised you'd never get transferred out of Williston as long as he was in charge." He set his finger on the tape player's start button. "Intensity, you know."

"All right!" Matt said, pressing his palms against the sides of his head. "I killed him, just like you said. He was a monster, don't you see? He would have kept making life hell for us until somebody—well, look at these others." He swept his hand dismissively over the heads of Larry, Rex, and Beth. "I'm the only one with any initiative."

Then his face reddened, and he began to cry. I snapped the cuffs on him, told him his rights, excused myself to the others, and walked him over to the jail.

When I returned to the mayor's office, only Alan and His Honor remained.

His Honor said, "Guess I owe you both an apology."

"Guess so," I said. "Alan solved us another one."

"Not yet," Alan said. He pulled another recorder, this

one a tiny microcassette number, from his gym bag. "We've got a taped confession. The prosecutor'll need evidence, too. Find Rex's phone. It should be in Hemphill's apartment or car. He probably didn't expect any trouble-swapping it back, and that would have covered him better than if he just threw it in the lake."

I spoke up. "I'll get on it. And I'll get the county guys to check for footprints around Rex's dock and house."

"You better start looking for thrown-out cassette tapes, too," Alan said, setting the larger cassette player on His Honor's desk and pressing the start button. It began to play . . . music.

"Bach," Alan said. "Brandenburg Concerto. It took all day yesterday to find all those memos. You didn't think I could search Brushy Bluff Road all the way to Hemphill's apartment, too, did you?"



Mystery Writers of America, Inc.

In Celebration of Its 50th Anniversary Mystery Writers of America Announces the "Golden Mysteries" Short Story Contest

THE CONTEST is open to everyone everywhere (except for certain contest judges, the judges' immediate families, and employees of Dell Magazines and The Mysterious Press). There is no entry fee. Entries must be postmarked no sooner than March 1, 1994, no later than August 31, 1994. All submissions should be between 3500 and 7500 words in length. They should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper and should include a cover sheet with the entrant's name, address, and telephone number, the story title, and its approximate length. The entrant's name should not appear on any page of the story, only on the cover sheet. No ghost stories or tales of the supernatural will be considered.

ENTRANTS WILL BE JUDGED in one of two categories: published writers or unpublished writers. For contest purposes, a published writer is one who has been paid money for any piece of fiction, whether or not it has been published. An unpublished writer is someone who has never received money for any piece of fiction. Only one story may be submitted by each entrant. It must be an original work, never published or accepted for publication. Entrants who wish their stories returned, or notification of contest results, should enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

PUBLISHED WRITERS should submit their stories to Edward D. Hoch, 2941 Lake Avenue, Rochester, NY 14612. Mr. Hoch's co-judges will be Sara Ann Freed, editor, The Mysterious Press, and Janet Hutchings, editor, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. UNPUBLISHED WRITERS should submit their stories to Clark Howard, P.O. Box 11507, Marina del Rey, CA 90295. Mr. Howard's co-judges will be Cathleen Jordan, editor, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and Walter Satterthwait, author.

CASH PRIZES to be awarded by Mystery Writers of America:

	PUBLISHED CATEGORY	UNPUBLISHED CATEGORY
1st Prize	\$2000	\$1500
2nd Prize	\$1500	\$1000
3rd Prize	\$1000	\$ 500

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* will have the option of publishing the top three stories in each category, with additional payment at their usual rates, and Mystery Writers of America will have the option of publishing any submitted story in a "Golden Mysteries" anthology, also with suitable payment. After the contest is over, and the above selections made, all entered stories may be resubmitted to the publication of your choice. Winners will be announced in January 1995.

The prizes indicated above may be increased by sponsor merchandise and/or additional cash.

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA wishes all entrants good writing and good luck!

FICTION

Suicide Jockeys

by James Lundquist



Illustration by Sallie Gregory

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Lena weighed no more than ninety pounds dripping wet, which she often was—soaked with sweat I mean—because it was her main job, besides looking pretty in a stringbean way, to fall down backwards in front of Bronco Haapala's '49 Ford and let him drive over her. It was the Grand Finale, the moment all the folks were waiting for and had shelled out a buck or two to see in the "Suicide Jockeys and Thrills Show" that Bronco and Lena and Knute "Behind-the-Wheel" Knutson had started running almost as soon as gas rationing ended after the war and the new dirt tracks opened up at Elk River, Sauk Rapids, Fargo, Sioux Falls, and places in between.

The show was Bronco's baby because he took credit for thinking it up, and he made sure that Lena and Knute never quite forgot that basic fact, even though Lena was Bronco's gal and Knute his best friend. They had to begin with a couple of old jalopies, a '37 Ford and a '39 Olds with bald tires, radiators that needed recoring, and broken windshields, which didn't matter because all the glass had to be knocked out anyway. But one very important thing was that both cars were coupes. And when Knute hung the straight pipes, they sounded either like fighter planes, which Bronco thought, or Fordson tractors, which Lena thought.

The scheme, Bronco's baby and actually one of a kind, never before attempted, never duplicated, was to begin with both cars driving around the oval, right at each other, from opposite starting points. On and on they would come, until Knute's Chevy would sprout a fake parachute as he hit the super-grabbing brakes, which he had installed in both coupes and which were the real secret of the act. But what got the crowd up cheering and laughing and knowing they were in for one hell of an evening was when Lena would rise up in the Ford and throw out a real anchor that grabbed into the track, plowed a furrow, and threw up dust or mud, depending on whether the track had been hosed down or not. Knute, Bronco, and Lena would jump out, lift the goggles on their aviator caps, bow to one another, and then to the stands.

In the next hour, the drivers would run their cars on ramps, two wheels at first to see how long they could run tilted over, almost tipping, but not quite. Then they would use the ramps as jumps, following one another bumper to bumper into the air and then around the track and over the ramps again, four times, five times. On the sixth approach, Knute would break out, swerve as if losing control, and then stop beneath the last ramp. Bronco, the Ford's

engine pumping smoke, would clear the first ramp and then go off the second and over Knute, who would stagger out, fall to his knees with a Bible in his hands, and pray. Lena, shaking her fist at Bronco, would jump into the Chevy and take off after him. Knute, Bible still in hand, would get as close to the crowd as he could, and shout, shaking his head, "Oh no! A woman driver! Run for cover!"

Bronco's Ford would still seem to be ailing, the engine not hitting on all eight, and the Chevy, Lena pawing wildly at the wheel, would roar up behind. As they approached the grandstand, Lena would pull alongside Bronco. He would cover his eyes with his hands—just long enough for the crowd to get the joke—before Lena hit the brakes, spun around twice, popped the clutch, and killed the motor. Knute would run over, drag her from the car, reach in, and grab the keys, which he would put in his pocket while shaking a finger in her face and telling her to go stand in the infield, where she would flop down and pretend to pout.

Back in the Chevy, Knute would pull even with Bronco and give the old signal for a drag race. The two of them would skid to a stop, get out, open their hoods, and make remarks about each other's engines before Bronco would hold up a five dollar bill; Knute, ear to the Ford's chattering engine, would hold up a ten. Bronco, thumbing through an empty wallet, would turn, spot Lena still pouting in the infield, and motion her to come over. He would then hand her over to Knute, who would break into a lantern-jawed grin. The bet was on, and Lena's charms were the stakes.

Knute, the flaps of his cap strooting out behind his head, would open a big lead—a half lap, and then almost a full one. Bronco could be seen cursing the Ford, pounding on the dash, pumping back and forth in the seat. Lena would stand at the finishing point, checkered flag held high. The distance was to be ten laps, and she signaled each one. At lap six, the Ford started to purr. At lap eight the race was dead even, at nine the same. But then Knute would reach down and begin throwing various objects out of the Chevy to lighten the load. First it was a case of beer, then a half dozen pairs of women's panties, finally a set of encyclopedias. Bronco had to turn left to avoid the beer; the panties flew through the open windshield and into his face just as he turned right to avoid the encyclopedias. Knute would roll to the finish line alone, stop, and claim Lena with a kiss and a long embrace, oblivious to the on-rushing Ford, Bronco waving a clenched fist out the window. He would be driving right at the two lovebirds, who paid no attention

to the shouted, screamed, shrieked, howled warnings from the crowd. Almost too fast to be seen—and many of the onlookers had their eyes closed anyway—Knut would dive aside. Lena would stand, not even for a second, staring down the vengeful Bronco, his pedal to the metal, before falling backward. Bronco would look back at Lena lying stiff and still on the track, pull to a shuddering stop, and run back to her, Knute already at her side. The two men would embrace like drunks and start to cry, at which point Lena would spring to her feet, kick both of them in the ass, strike a victory pose for the crowd, strut to the Chevy, and drive off, leaving the two losers to pick up the beer case and the encyclopedias and depart in the Ford full of panties, sadder men but wiser. You got your money's worth at that show, Bronco's baby.

Bronco had left it up to Knute to figure out a way to move from track to track once they had the show up and running. At first they simply drove the old Ford and Chevy over the highway, pulling the ramps in trailers, but that was too tough on the cars, and besides it was illegal to run without windshields. Knute sat down at a cafe table one afternoon with a pot of coffee and ruled tablet and sketched out a rigging system for a flatbed lowboy that would let them carry the cars, ramps, toolboxes, everything. "It would be the cat's ass," Knute said.

So Bronco borrowed some money someplace and bought a Cornbinder gas-burner in pretty good shape and a flatbed to go with it. He also bought a '38 Dodge pickup, and that's how they traveled—Knut drove the Cornbinder, and Bronco and Lena followed in the pickup. It was a good deal, and they stayed with it on into the 1950's, even when they were able to replace the old Ford and Chevy with a '49 Ford and a '50 Merc. Bronco wanted to stay with the Ford-Chevy combo, but Knute said no one would believe a Chevy straight-six would be any match for the new Ford flathead-eight. The Merc was heavy, but Knute made some changes here and there until even Lena could drive it over a ramp, one hand on the wheel, the other outstretched like a wing, a cigarette dangling from her fingers. Bronco did not like Lena's smoking, but they made her one-handed jump part of the show anyway, the basic story line staying, no-matter-what.

By 1953 they were making good money. Stock car racing went on in some towns four or five nights a week, and the Suicide Jockeys could count on a full house just about everywhere they went.

Family entertainment was the thing, and black and white TV had not yet wrecked local color. Almost everyone was a yokel and took great pleasure in seeing other yokels extend yokelism to the limit. For the Suicide Jockeys, it was their time, and there would never be another like it.

But whenever the stands were not full, Bronco would take out a can of wax and start polishing—grooming might be a better word—the Ford, and usually the bad feeling in his stomach would go away. Lena would yell at him to cut it out, that he was acting as nervous as a cat. And indeed Bronco had taken on a snarling edge. Once he accused Lena of suggesting that his reflexes were going. Another time, when a sparkplug wire popped loose on the Ford halfway through a show and Bronco almost crashed, he went at Knute afterwards with a socket wrench and a full can of Valvoline.

Things came pretty much to a head one evening in Sioux Falls. The arrangement most nights was to get rooms in the same motel, one for Bronco and Lena, and one for Knute. After the show, the three of them would eat together in the motel restaurant or whatever was most convenient. Then Knute would take the pickup and go off by himself to a tavern for a few bumps. Knute was not much of a ladies' man. It probably had something to do with his being a mechanic. But he was known to have a few beers, and Bronco did not like it. Bronco was a big man with a belly, but he never drank. "Don't have time for it and those who do it," he would say.

Lately, just once or twice, he thought he smelled booze on Lena's breath. He didn't know for sure, but he worried that she was starting to have a nip to get her nerve up. It bothered him that she had to, that maybe she had lost faith in him, the driver.

That night in Sioux Falls they ate mostly in silence. Bronco never ordered the same meal twice, although every other part of his day was a matter of ritual, the show at the center, at the bull's-eye of his big round heart. Knute, on the other hand, always ordered steak and eggs, hashbrowns, toast, and a large glass of chocolate milk. Lena usually started out by saying that she wasn't that hungry, and then would order one cheeseburger, no fries, and black coffee. Knute and Lena got what they always got, if they could get it. Bronco scanned the menu as if each item were prey. He glanced first at Knute and then at Lena, and made his selection. He chose the prairie oysters, deep-fried, with home fries and sauerkraut.

"I don't know how you can eat those goddamned things," Lena said.

Lena's remark was predictable; it was what she said no matter what Bronco ordered. But what set him off was hearing Knute's barely audible "heh, heh, heh." Now that's the sound just about anyone makes when prairie oysters are ordered. No matter how many times you ask for them, somewhere, someone will go "heh, heh, heh." The waitresses are disappointed if they don't hear it. There's a certain pride that goes along with serving deep-fried testicles and never cracking a smile.

Bronco stared at Knute long and hard. Try as he would, Knute couldn't choke down the sly Scandinavian smirk that clung to his long sad face like milk to the snout of a calf who has been in the pail too long. "I didn't mean nothing by it, boss," Knute said. "You know I ain't no wise ass. It's just what you ordered, you can't blame nobody for, well, you know."

Knute had taken to calling Bronco boss ever since the loose sparkplug wire incident, and Bronco didn't like it, or what he didn't like was the way Knute would say it, as if he didn't really think Bronco *was* the boss.

"So you think I'm ordering what I'm ordering because you think I need what I'm ordering, is that it?"

"No, boss, no. I still think you've got lots of . . . of . . . uh, what you ordered there."

At which point Lena pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her purse and lit up a Pall Mall straight. It was all Bronco could do to stop himself from ripping the Pall Mall pack to shreds, right down to the "In hoc signes vinces" motto on the label. Lena beat him to the punch.

"I'll smoke any goddamned time I want to!"

"If you didn't smoke so goddamned much, you wouldn't be so goddamned skinny!"

"If I weren't so goddamned skinny, you couldn't run over me, and that would be the end of your stupid show, your stupid baby as you always call it!"

Now they had gotten to this point in disagreeable hoo-rahs many times before, and all might have ended well right then and there if Knute had played his usual part, which was to keep his mouth shut.

"I, for one," he said in the only voice-speed he had, which was top speed, but first gear, "t'ink she looks just fine. She ain't too skinny."

What was eating at Bronco chomped down hard at that moment. Knute and Lena had started their embrace way too soon the last couple of shows. The thought had been in his mind like a dog waiting in the ditch to chase the next car that comes along.

"So that's it," Bronco said. "That's what's going on here. Ain't we something! You two don't know what we're doing out there is family entertainment. If you hug and kiss and do it like it's for real, why then it ain't what it's supposed to be! And that means you're cheating the paying customers, that's what! Besides, if you want to know what's what, you ignorant Swede, screwing Lena is like doing it to a washboard!"

Here Bronco had crossed the centerline for sure, and it was a yellow line on a curving hill, on the upgrade. He saw the oncoming headlights, but try as he would, the steering was jammed. He sat, reaching for a brake pedal that wasn't there, watching Lena drop the Pall Malls like a depth charge into her purse. She took the hand of the lanky mechanic, who looked as if he had been hit on the head with one of the rubber hammers he used to round off dents after each show, and led him toward the door. "Us two are going to have some fun for once," she said, and it was, of course, loud enough for everyone in the restaurant to hear. "See you later, horse's ass, I mean Bronco, big Mister Suicide Jockey!"

Bronco faced a rough choice when the waitress appeared just then out of the kitchen with the steak and eggs, the cheeseburger, and the prairie oysters. He said he'd pay for it all, just box up the steak and eggs and the cheeseburger to go. And then, not knowing what else to do, people staring at him, he put knife and fork to his supper.

Alone in the motel room, Bronco almost wished he had learned how to drink with the other Finlanders up on the Iron Range. But then he consoled himself in the usual way when he was about to start singing the blues—he thought of what fun it would be to have a new Crown Victoria and take off for Seattle, open it up all the way across North Dakota, just him and Lena, no damned Knute to say, "I t'ink you got a bad valve there."

But when Bronco woke up the next morning and turned over to grab his washboard, he grabbed air. No Lena. Bronco discovered he was still dressed. At first he thought someone must have doped his dinner, but then he remembered that it must have been the old Crown Victoria dream that had done him in. He poked his head out the door, his hair straight up from sleeping crooked, and saw

the pickup parked in front of Knute's room. Bronco pounded on the door. He heard Lena's distant voice tell him to come in. She and Knute were sitting, fully clothed, on the bed.

Knute, his eyes as red as transmission fluid, lurched sideways to his feet and got behind the desk. He picked up the Gideon's Bible. "I swear, boss, I swear nothing happened. She just wouldn't go back to you. I tried to talk sense, but she wouldn't, she just wouldn't hear me."

Knute looked as if he were going to fall on his knees when Lena told him to shut up, that of course something had happened, and that Bronco might as well face up to it. With that, she pushed Bronco aside, went to the other room, came out with her suitcase, went to the office, and called a cab. Bronco asked her not to go, said they could talk things over. She told him he was concerned about only one thing, his baby, not her, not anything else.

"That ain't true," he said. "There's the Crown Victoria."

Lena screamed until the cab pulled up. Knute thought she was going to bust a gut. But she stopped, just like that, and put one tiny hand to Bronco's throat. "Don't worry," she whispered, flooding his nostrils with the bitterness of vodka sours still remembered. "I'll be back in time for the show. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You'll do the Grand Finale?" Bronco asked, a little too hopefully. Lena tossed her bag into the cab herself, got in, slammed the door, and pointed forward with such a violent movement that the cabdriver thought she was trying to stab him. Then he pulled away, spraying gravel in Bronco's blank face.

Bronco and Knute worked the day away at the speedway. Bronco waxed both cars. Knute changed the oil and crawled around with the grease gun. Not once did he use the word boss. Bronco sat for a long while in the afternoon trying to figure out how the two of them could do the show alone. But the Grand Finale was what the people came to see. That plain fact blew the engine in Bronco's train of thought every time. Nothing—including the very tempting idea of having Knute do the fall-down and have his long nose scraped off by the differential, assuming it would clear the crankcase—would do but to hope Lena would show up, which she did, at the last moment.

She stepped out of the cab with her show costume on (black coveralls with "Suicide Jockeys" sequined on the back). She walked right past Bronco and got into the Ford. Bronco and Knute stood staring like a pair of bumper jacks jacked to the max until Lena

tripped their release levers by saying quietly, sweetly, in a voice that did not sound natural, "What are you waiting for, guys? Let's get this baby over with once and for all."

Around and around the track they went. Lena threw out the anchor, Bronco and Knute tilted off the ramps, did their jumps, and Lena did her one-handed steering of the Merc, gunning the engine for record distance in her jump. Only the Grand Finale remained. As he dodged the beer case, flung the panties aside, and did a long skid around the encyclopedias, Bronco, thinking of Lena and Knute standing in front of him just around the final curve, held up on the footfeet for one second, two seconds, then he did what he had to do—he floored it.

What he saw as he pounded into the straightaway, flames shooting from his pipes, was Lena, arms at her side, all alone. She had pushed Knute aside so suddenly that he tripped and was crawling like a square-headed crayfish onto the infield. Bronco didn't have time to hit the brakes. Suicide! Lena was going to die! These thoughts stopped as instantly as they started when Bronco watched Lena—yes, it was in slow motion—raise her right arm and level a revolver. It was just dark enough in the twilight for the muzzle blast to blind him for an instant, and then he saw her face.

For the only time in all of his driving, Bronco let a car get away from him. He lost his grip on the wheel. The Ford veered left and rolled three times. It came to rest upright, Bronco held tight by the super-strong harness Knute had spent a whole week rigging. All he could hear was cheering as he sat stunned at still being alive. He stepped out and put his hands on top of the roof to steady himself. And then Lena was at his side, pulling him a few feet toward the grandstand. Knute helped hold him up, while Lena struck her victory pose, the gun still in her hand. She strutted to the Mercury, got in, and drove away.

"What the deuce?" Bronco asked. "Am I here? What is this?"

"Don't ask me, boss," Knute said, pushing him toward the Ford. "Let's see if this old thrashing machine still goes."

Knute nursed the shuddering, creaking, hissing Ford through the rest of the act, but he didn't expect Bronco to get out and pick up the encyclopedias, the panties, and the beer case. The two thought they were finished, but the owner of the speedway ran out as they drove in front of the crowd and told them he had never seen anything like it, that he'd double the pay for another show next week. He waved Lena and the Merc back, and she came in

through the far gate and circled the track. People were flinging quarters, half-dollars, and crumpled-up bills. Someone even made a paper airplane of a twenty, which sailed in a long arc so true that Lena was able to catch it neatly as she stopped the Merc and struck another pose. Someone, just by chance, had found "Pistol Packin' Mama" and put it on the P.A. system.

Back at the restaurant, Bronco, Lena, and Knute sat in silence, full cups of coffee in front of them. Bronco was a little shaky. Lena was smoking a Pall Mall, taking short, purposeful puffs. Knute resorted to Scandinavian impassivity, which sometimes passes for thoughtfulness. Bronco was about to say something—he did not know what—when Lena reached into her purse and dropped six .38 caliber cartridges on the table. One was empty.

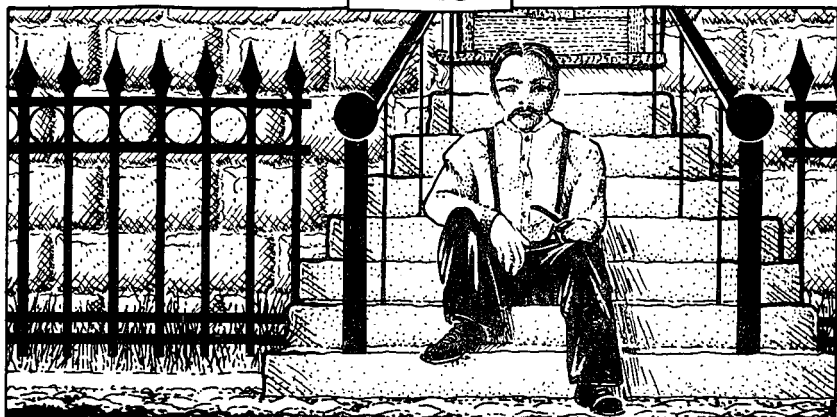
"You mean . . ." Bronco began.

"Did I use a blank? Did I miss on purpose? Did I shoot to kill? You'll never know."

Bronco had to look away. Lena deserved some credit. She had done what he never thought possible—she had improved on the Grand Finale, and it could never be done the old way again. He had signed a contract. News had gotten out. Their pictures would be in the paper. But there was one detail to clear up.

"You'll use blanks from now on for sure?"

Knute cleared his throat of the snoose that had remained frozen there ever since he saw Lena level the revolver, dead-on, or so he thought. He said that he might have a bump or two, and that tomorrow he'd get to work, "first t'ing," on an extra roll-bar for the Ford. And the one Suicide Jockey who didn't believe in taking chances went out the door.



Crosscurrents and Eddies

by Stephen Wasylyk

When he founded his detective agency at the turn of the century in Philadelphia, my father's reasoning was simple—any man who elects the pursuit of lawbreakers as his occupation need never lack work. He was right.

Osborne Cartwright was admirably suited for the profession he'd chosen. Possessing intelligence, common sense, and an incorruptible honesty, he towered over ordinary men, his shoulders broad, his arms thick, his chest deep, and his strength awesome. Only someone crazed with drink or desperation dared challenge him physically, even with a weapon in hand. The appearance of this bearded giant in his dark suit, starched collar, and derby, thundering in his deep voice, *I have you now!* would cause any lawbreaker to raise his hands in despair.

I was twelve when he opened his office. Four years later, good-hearted but misguided people expressed indignation at his placing his sixteen-year-old son in harm's way by naming him as part-

As on the bright late-October noon when a Miss Matilda Beeskamp presented herself at our office. Slender, her blonde hair pinned beneath her hat, she could not be termed a raving beauty, but she was very attractive none the less as she sat with her gloved hands clutching her purse. Her clothing had obviously been purchased in one of the department stores rather than one of the exclusive shops, but it was very tasteful and well fitted.

She asked if we had read of the death of Marcus Deveraux.

Since it had been headlined in all the newspapers, his demise would have been impossible to overlook.

Deveraux had an office on Broad Street where he was partner in a firm that dealt with the distribution of steel products. According to the building janitor, he had set out for home at seven P.M. He lived three blocks south and six blocks west on Pine, a quiet street lined with stately three story brownstones and trees. A very pleasant stroll during the day beneath the yellow, amber, gold, and red of the dying leaves, but those serrated harbingers of the coming winter still clinging to the branches darkened the street once daylight fled.

Not until after midnight did his tearful wife report to the police that he never arrived and a search was instituted. Clad only in underwear, his body was found late the next day in a field near the Schuylkill Arsenal on Grays Ferry Avenue.

It was conjectured that during his walk Deveraux was abducted and driven there to be robbed, stripped of his fine clothing, and shot to death.

No one along Pine had heard or witnessed anything amiss, and the papers said the police attributed the foul deed to a band who had committed similar atrocities.

Miss Beeskamp said she had been secretary to the dead man. In her opinion, he had been murdered by someone close to him, and the method used was merely a subterfuge to assign the crime to the gang. He had been a big man with an aggressive manner and a short temper, she said, and any criminal would think twice about accosting him. She was so certain that this was the case, she'd given up her lunch to ask my father if he would look into it at her expense.

While our charges were not excessive, she was obviously a person of modest means. An impulsive investigation instituted through emotion rather than solid evidence—her flushed cheeks and tears indicating an affection for her dead employer that was far more

ner—ignoring, of course, the thousands upon thousands of youngsters of all ages routinely employed by an endless variety of commercial enterprises, few of which concerned themselves one iota with their safety and well-being.

Those poor unfortunates had no control over their destinies. I did. To step into danger, run, or fight was my decision alone. I regret that my decision most often was to run. I had inherited neither my father's physical attributes nor his courage, being slight and small and destined to be so even after I matured. When confronted, I depended on wit, guile, and quick feet to avoid physical harm.

My contribution to the firm was more cerebral than physical. In addition to a maturity beyond my years, I possessed a probing mind with a scientific bent my father lacked, a head packed with knowledge gained through voracious reading of periodicals at the Free Library a few doors from our office on Market Street—learning of new developments in criminal detection and muttering in frustration because most were not yet available—and the ability to stand back, examine a situation with a scientist's detachment, and isolate the essential elements, a natural ability which cannot be taught.

Indeed, those were the chief assets of a detective in tracking down the guilty. Fingerprint identification and ballistics were new. Forensics had yet to be discovered as a tool. Only in the larger cities were criminals beginning to be routinely photographed. There was little communication between police departments, and extensive files on criminals did not exist—save for the file created by the great Alan Pinkerton which later formed the foundation for that of the FBI.

A flair for acting also allowed me to play any role necessary in the acquisition of essential information. Dressed in ragged clothing, among the row houses of South Philadelphia I was Italian. In Kensington I was Irish. And if need be, I could dress smartly, polish my language, and be at home among the well-to-do and wealthy. No better means of obtaining information than infiltration has yet been devised.

We formed an excellent team. That we never achieved fame or fortune was certainly due not to a lack of clientele but more to the compassionate heart of my father. Spin him an interesting tale of wrongdoing—weep a little if you were a woman—and you had the assistance of Osgood Cartwright whether you could pay or not.

than secretarial—could easily wipe out whatever meager savings she had managed to accumulate.

Prudent regard for her finances called for suggesting she take her suspicions to the police, but I wasn't surprised when my father picked up his pen and asked that she continue while he made notes.

Mr. Deveraux had a violent disagreement with his partner, she said, one Horace Fenwick, who had acquired a gambling fever at his club and fallen victim to those more skilled or luckier than he, amassing a considerable debt underwritten by the business without Deveraux's knowledge or consent. Deveraux intended to buy out Fenwick's share. While the money would satisfy Fenwick's obligations, he would have to start over again elsewhere. With Deveraux now dead, Fenwick could easily pay off what he owed while remaining the sole proprietor of a successful business.

There was also a clerk in the office named Lester Green. Green was young and handsome—a ladies' man. It was clear to everyone except Deveraux that he'd formed a special relationship with Mrs. Deveraux, married though she was. I was only sixteen, but I needed no elaboration of that relationship, which certainly would have embarrassed Miss Beeskamp.

The third man, she said, was a middle-aged bookkeeper named Simon Peck. Two days ago Deveraux had found a discrepancy that seemed to indicate that Peck had misappropriated a large sum, but Peck swore there must be an error. An irate Deveraux had dismissed him on the spot. Peck departed the office muttering that Deveraux would pay dearly for branding him a thief.

My father's questions produced the further information that Mr. Deveraux worked late so often—the penalty of being in business—that leaving at seven might be considered early, and that aside from those three she knew of no one else with a motive.

When she hesitantly asked what our charges might be, my father told her we would first look into it to determine if her suspicions were merited. I winced at once again contributing time and effort without recompense.

He took the addresses of the three men and escorted her gently out of the office. When he returned, I said, "I think, father, that our time would better spent elsewhere. The death of her employer is such a shock the good woman is allowing her emotions to rule her actions."

The soft way he spoke, rather than the words, made me realize he had found Miss Beeskamp very attractive indeed. "Perhaps, but

I see her as level-headed and not given to flights of fancy." He paused and smiled suddenly. "Further, you will notice that two of the three stand to gain, indeed already have gained, from Deveraux's death. Fenwick gets the business, and Green perhaps the widow and her inheritance. Peck, if guilty, is motivated only by revenge, which may be a strong motive but not as strong as greed. When in doubt, always look for where the money goes. Now to work. I will proceed to the police station to scan the police report while you see if the neighbors' opinions of these three gentlemen coincide with Miss Beeskamp's and determine how they spent the evening of the murder."

I was a realist. If I won the argument as junior partner, I'd have lost it as his son. I donned hand-me-down clothes—sufficiently worn, patched, and ill-fitting to have survived several older siblings—from the wardrobe I kept in the office and set out on foot for Peck's home on Wood Street, not far from the Delaware River. I left my bicycle behind. Bumpy cobblestone streets wreaked havoc with air-filled tires, while roughnecks in the riverfront areas would enjoy separating it from me with a few well-placed blows.

The street was almost an areaway. Marble stoops and sloping cellar entrances further narrowed the ribbons of sidewalk. Taking a break from whatever game they had been playing, a half-dozen raggedy children eyed me with suspicion, but no more so than the stout, middle-aged woman scrubbing the already gleaming white marble stoop of the house next to Peck's.

I doffed my cap and politely asked if she knew where Mr. Peck lived.

She glared at me. "And why d'ya want t'know?" From wherever she'd come in Ireland, she'd brought the brogue with her.

I spun a fabric of lies about soliciting subscriptions to the *Journal* and was informed that I'd be wasting my efforts.

An unfair dismissal by a cruel employer had cost him his job, she said, and the family was desolate, rendered even more so when the employer was murdered, leaving Peck with no possible redress.

"Murdered? Perhaps Mr. Peck was angry enough to do the deed."

She straightened, brushed back a loose tendril with a wet hand, and glared at me. "Bless your good fortune you're not reelin' from the back of me hand for utterin' those words, boy. A mild man, a bookkeeper so he is, not given to violence a'tall, and furthermore, did not we neighbors visit on the night of the murder to express

our sympathy at the cruelty of fate, with himself sitting there the while tryin' to look brave?"

"I apologize, Mrs., and thank you for the pleasant conversation. Perhaps I'll be luckier elsewhere."

The ragged clothing would serve no further purpose. In the office, I exchanged it for a suit—worn only on Sunday in some levels of society but daily by those of breeding and gentility—mine slightly worn as though my family had suffered a financial setback.

Lester Green lived in the vicinity of Twenty-second and Arch streets. Many of the small houses in that area had been converted to somewhat down-at-the-heel rooming houses, made gloomy by surrounding business establishments and the so-called Chinese Wall of enormous granite blocks that bisected the western half of center city as it carried the tracks of the Pennsylvania Railroad into Broad Street Station. Living here was economical and convenient to the growing business district around the new City Hall.

My knowledge of the city was extensive. After a weak heart and a bout with pneumonia took my mother from us, my father insisted that I continue my schooling and attend the university, but without her prodding and support, I lost interest in formal education. I intended to be a private detective like him, a profession which could not be learned from books but in actual practice, and what better place than in his office? I spent my spare time there, to his loud displeasure, leaving to prowl about the city when my presence made him too irate. After my assistance in solving several cases—one the recovery of valuable historical documents pilfered from the university library—could not be denied, he accepted me as his partner.

The houses along one side of Green's street were a somewhat shabby row of red brick. The other side consisted of small shops of the industrial type, selling machinery and repair work and the like, signs proclaiming a few as offices. The business people would hardly know much about the residents across from them, or even care, for that matter. I would have to meet this problem head on and hope for the best.

I approached his number to find a small, mustachioed man sitting on one of the steps of the stoop, his booted feet planted on the sidewalk. He wore a collarless shirt and baggy trousers supported by braces, and his black hair was parted in the center and plastered to his head. His hawklike face was one of the most weatherbeaten I had ever seen, the skin dark, tight, and leathery.

"Does Mr. Lester Green live here?" I asked.

He puffed on a pipe as he looked me up and down with eyes strangely pale, as though lighted from within by a perpetual flame of resentment. Troublemaker's eyes, my father called them.

"He does, boy, but he is at work at the moment."

"That's all to the good," I said, "because I am not looking for the man himself but information about him that is important to me."

The pale eyes showed interest. "And why is that?"

"I have an older sister. On his deathbed, my father asked me to look after her, since I was now the man in the family and would know more of the pitfalls a young woman should avoid—"

"Ha!" he said.

"—make certain no man takes advantage of her, he said. And that's why I'm here. Mr. Green has expressed an interest in her, and it is my duty and obligation—"

He beamed at me. "My boy, I am happy to see that at your age you are already aware that there are men a good woman should never trust. Before I was forced to leave the sea to scrape out a living as a lowly peddler, I knew many such, sailors being notorious for making women promises they do not intend to keep. To my everlasting shame, I confess I've told such a lie or two myself. But when you speak of Lester Green—" He shook his head sadly. "To persuade a young woman to bestow her favors on you is a game played since time began, but to profit monetarily from such a victory—" He shook his head again. "He once laughingly spoke of persuading a young woman to part with her life savings so that he could purchase clothing of a quality he himself could not afford. You have good cause to be wary."

"Perhaps you can tell me where he was two evenings ago. He had an appointment with her he did not keep, which left her weeping. If I could tell her he was with another, she may see him in the light he deserves."

"Such thoughtlessness is typical of his type. Why any man should have spent that evening here listening to my tales of the sea when he could have enjoyed the company—tell me, does your sister possess any assets?"

"Aside from those that God gave her, only a small fund inherited from our parents to serve as her dowry."

"Ah, an attractive young woman with money, then." His eyes gleamed as he moistened his lips. "Perhaps I should meet her and explain that an association with Lester Green can bring only heart-

break and sorrow. I'm certain she will be more heedful of an experienced old sailor than a younger brother."

I reflected that if I had a sister I would not allow her to walk on the same side of the street as this man.

"If I need more assistance, I will certainly call on you," I said.

The second phase of my assignment complete, there remained only Horace Fenwick. Walking to his residence was out of the question. He lived in Chestnut Hill in the far northwest of the city, reached most easily by one of the frequent trains from the Reading Terminal, an expense I regretted because it would not be reimbursed. A half hour later I was heading down one of the quiet, tree-lined streets. Magnificent houses with large verandahs set back on well-tended lawns formed an enclave of affluence.

As I pondered plausible falsehoods that could get a lady of the house or a servant to speak about a neighbor, a man pushed a two-wheeled cart around the corner, the cart loaded with the tools of a groundskeeper and gardener. He was small and wiry and well tanned, wearing a loose shirt, dirt-stained trousers, and a flat-crowned hat with a wide brim.

As I passed, the long handle of a rake suddenly barred my way. The hardness in his eyes made me uncomfortable.

"And what are you up to, young man?"

"I am merely passing," I said.

"Passing, indeed," he snapped. "I recognize a weed in a well-kept lawn when I see one. You don't belong here at all. You have the shifty look of one scouting the neighborhood to see which houses might well lend themselves to burglary by confederates. What *are* you doing here, boy? Quick now, or I'll call for the police."

Refusing to be intimidated, I pushed the handle away with a firm hand. "That would be a waste of our time and theirs. I'm here as a detective on legitimate business seeking information about one of the residents."

"A detective?" He grinned and lowered the handle. "I thought I'd seen you before, lad, but misremembered where. A few weeks ago I was spectator to the arrest of a bank robber brought to justice by a large detective named Cartwright. You were at his side, but I did not think one so young would also be a detective."

"He is my father and my partner," I said.

"Well, I'll be damned." He waved a hand. "Some say these people acquire their money by stealing, but certainly nothing so brazen

as openly robbing banks. So then what information do you look for?"

"Perhaps you know a Mr. Horace Fenwick?"

"Indeed, I do. I've been his gardener and groundskeeper for two years or more. Mrs. Fenwick instructs me and Mr. Fenwick pays me, but if I don't see the color of some money today, I'll not touch another twig or blade of grass. He's heavily in debt, I'm told, but sympathy does not pay my bills."

"You should see your money soon. Surely you've read in the papers that his partner was murdered two nights ago and the business is now his."

"I regret I can read only what nature places before me, young Cartwright." His eyes narrowed. "Does this mean—"

"It means nothing other than I would like to know if he was at home with his family when the crime was committed."

"Ah. Then let me tell you that two nights ago I stopped by to see if I could shake some money loose from him but his wife told me he would not be home until late."

"I thank you for the information, Mr.—"

"John Smith, young Cartwright, only one of many named thus by unimaginative parents."

"I'll take no more of your time, Mr. Smith. You have a living to make."

When I arrived back at our building, my father was standing at the door in the company of Sergeant Cletus Galway. Sergeant Galway was a short, barrel-shaped man with very little neck and a flat, broad face who allowed my father access to police information not only because they were old friends but also because we cooperated fully with him.

"Any success?"

"Mr. Peck was at home. So was Lester Green, who is a fortune hunter as Miss Beeskamp suspects. Mr. Fenwick was out however, and his finances are so low he is unable to pay the gardener."

"Cletus will make note of your efforts. In the meantime, he has given us permission to visit the scene of the crime."

A trolley dropped us off close to where the body was found. We made our way down a dirt access road, industrial plants of one type or another along one side, the other a sea of knee-high grass and weeds that stretched to a low embankment topped by a railroad spur, beyond which the Schuylkill River gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

After sunset, no more lonely or deserted spot would exist in the city.

My father indicated a swath leveled through the grasses. We followed it to a circular area mashed flat by many feet.

"He was evidently dragged here from the road. Cletus told me the police misled the newspapers in saying the gang abducted him. It is not their way, he said, to abduct a man, particularly one of Deveraux's size and personality, on a street like Pine, where a scuffle and cry would attract attention. Another victim could be assaulted elsewhere with less risk. He feels Deveraux went willingly with someone he had no reason to fear. After the deed was done, he was dragged off the road and stripped to make him appear a random victim."

Since there still appeared to be no profit for the firm in this matter, I happily said, "With the police already on the trail, there is no reason for us to continue. We may as well go on to other business."

He ignored me. "Cletus reasoned that Mr. Deveraux had to have complete faith in the person to accompany him at night to such a desolate area. A partner being as trusted as a wife, he immediately considered Mr. Fenwick. He found he'd been gambling as usual, trying to recoup his losses and naturally losing more. He had no other suspects until I informed him of what Miss Beeskamp said about Peck and Green."

"But I have just determined each has an alibi."

"One would not expect that someone planning to murder Mr. Deveraux would not prepare one beforehand," he said smugly.

It dawned on me that perhaps more than compassion was involved here—that my father was determined to become a hero in Miss Beeskamp's eyes. That being so, it was best to solve the case quickly so that we could proceed with less romantic matters like earning rent money.

"Exactly how did Mr. Deveraux die?"

"A single shot to the head. The size of the wound indicates a pistol of small caliber, possibly a derringer. Another factor that made Cletus suspicious. Deadly if the bullet finds a vital spot but not threatening enough to keep a man like Deveraux from challenging it with his life at stake. Habitual criminals use weapons far more intimidating. No, the poor man had to be unaware of his danger."

I scanned the trampled weeds. "No blood was found?"

"Easily explained. There is only a small entry and no exit wound."

"Or the crime was committed elsewhere."

"A possibility, but transporting a dead body is not easy. Much simpler to entice the victim to a desolate area and kill him."

"It is much too far to walk, so a conveyance was necessary. The trolley? A hansom cab? It seems to me that if I intended to murder a man, I would want as few people as possible to see me in his presence."

My father chuckled. "You think well. Cletus is already checking the stables for rented vehicles. How many other questions flow through the magnificent mind you could have inherited only from your mother?"

"Mr. Deveraux's short temper, for one. He would not allow himself to be driven through the night to an unknown destination. He would first require a logical and reasonable explanation for the journey. His clothing is another. A criminal would keep his clothes to sell, but they would only hamper this murderer's escape and link him to Deveraux's death if discovered. He would not have taken them far."

"I am sure Cletus searched the area."

I looked pointedly at the railroad tracks and the Schuylkill beyond. "Hmmm," I said, a response that always irritated him, and walked to the bank of the river. Upstream were piers for the coal barges and canal boats, but here the ground sloped to the water.

My father joined me. "The clothes were tossed into the river?"

"It seems logical, but why wasn't Deveraux in them? The body could easily have been dragged the remaining distance."

He clapped a big hand to his head. "Excellent! A missing body means no death proved and no assets inherited. More and more, Mr. Fenwick takes center stage. Perhaps he hired someone."

Perhaps, but although bitten by the gambling bug, Mr. Fenwick couldn't be so stupid as to solve one problem while creating another. More crosscurrents and eddies were appearing than the Schuylkill developed in its journey to the sea.

I mounted the railroad spur, its few feet of elevation allowing a survey of the area. Across the road, the slanted rays of the sun bathed the buildings—a half dozen or so, all belching smoke, the odor wafting our way from one indicating a brewery. A visit to each was called for to see if one held the reason Deveraux would have come here. The brewery would be last. Most offered free sam-

ples, and I knew that my father's fondness for beer would keep him sampling their product while regaling them with tales of the cases he'd solved.

Fortunately, the brewers subscribed to the theory that if two glasses weren't enough to decide the superiority of their beverage, an entire keg wouldn't help.

My father's frustration over the lack of free beer didn't match mine over learning nothing. No one had heard of Deveraux until his body was found across the road.

As we walked out to the street to catch the trolley back into center city, disappointment kept my eyes on the road. A dry fall and the daily pounding of hooves and wheels, particularly by the heavy brewery wagons, had churned the surface into a layer of dust, the latest vehicles to pass leaving clear ribbonlike tracks. One, along the very edge, showed a sharply defined triangular gouge in a narrow metal tire. I knew, of course, what had caused it. The weld joining the ends of the iron rim had partially broken and a jolt against a cobblestone or curb had snapped off a piece.

Idly, I paced the distance between the marks as I walked along. Perhaps seven and a half feet. Since the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter was defined by π , or roughly a factor of three, the track had been left by a wheel measuring approximately two and a half feet, indicating a small cart pushed by hand.

That little mental exercise set my brain to functioning again, fanning to full status the doubt that had been in my mind all along.

Transporting a body was not the problem my father said it was. Who would pay attention to a drunk slumped in the seat of a buggy being driven home by a friend? Who would note a covered body in the bed of a wagon? No, the problem would be loading such a heavy, inert weight into a conveyance. Upon arrival, the body was simply dragged to where it was found.

But if Deveraux had been killed elsewhere, new possibilities emerged. One, lurking in the back of my mind, thrust itself forward, demanding to be examined and refuted if possible.

I could find nothing wrong with it.

Miss Beeskamp lived on Latimer, one of those cobblestone side streets so narrow that when younger I had engaged in spitting contests with other boys to see who could reach the far curb, until chased by irate adults who loudly and indignantly predicted that

such disgusting and mindless behavior foretold dire futures for us all.

When she emerged on her way to work the next morning, I swung my bicycle in beside her. As she strode along the sun-dappled red brick sidewalk returning good morning smiles, head erect beneath the flat-crowned hat, lace at her throat and white gloves spotless and the faint fragrance she wore wafting toward me now and then, I was suddenly reminded of my mother. My throat constricted, and tears momentarily blurred my vision. Why, I had no idea. She in no way resembled her.

I controlled myself and told her I'd been delegated to ask a few questions in this manner, rather than appear in her office where my presence might cause embarrassment. She thanked me for our consideration.

How long had Fenwick been a partner, and where had Lester Green and Simon Peck been employed before coming to the firm? Fenwick and Deveraux had started the firm together, she said. Green had been with them for a year, his previous employment with a firm named Ruffkin and Scott. Peck had worked for the Reading Railroad before joining the firm five years ago. Did Mr. Deveraux work alone in the evening or did others also stay? She did occasionally, she said. Her stride seemed to falter when she told me that on the night in question, she'd left at six.

I thanked her and rode off to locate Deveraux's house.

It was the corner house at the end of a row; three full stories with another level of living quarters tucked under the roof. Wide marble steps led to a portico and a pair of magnificent gleaming oak doors with leaded glass windows. His business might be termed small, but a house of this magnificence said profits had to be very large indeed.

I wheeled around the corner and skidded to a halt at the alleyway that allowed access to the rear. For most city houses, that passage between the high, wood-back yard fences was scarcely wide enough for two people to pass. This one would allow a small wagon—designed that way, no doubt, so that tradespeople's battered carts wouldn't sully the affluence of the front.

I'd found nothing that faulted the idea I was pursuing, but also little to reinforce it. Leaning on my handlebars, I spat over my front wheel—the manly way of showing disgust at everything from your own failings to an idea someone had presented. Very little spittle but the gesture was what counted. My eye fell on a narrow

track left by a wheel in the dust.

The track showed the same triangular gouge as the one on the dirt road.

My mouth went completely dry. *That* single track of a two-wheeled cart—a four-wheeled vehicle would have created twin marks—I had arbitrarily attributed to someone making a delivery to one of the firms or even picking up a keg of beer at the brewery. I hadn't considered it as the vehicle used to bring Deveraux's body there, the thought of a dead man being trundled through the streets by hand too bizarre to be credible.

And yet what better way? It had been assumed his body had been disposed of late at night, but the pre-dawn hours were filled with the handcarts of an endless variety of tradesmen and back yard peddlers setting out to do a day's business.

I smiled. I had said nothing to my father because I might be proved wrong. Whenever I was, he would clap me on the shoulder and boom, "Nice try, lad," as though reassuring an unsteady babe who had fallen after his third step, a fatherly but condescending practice I felt I'd outgrown.

But a youth of sixteen can only think, reason, examine, and conclude. He has no power to act. As much as I wished I could bring the matter to a successful conclusion alone, I would have to put my pride and ego aside and turn it over to those who did.

Cletus Galway knelt by the track, measuring it carefully with a ruler.

"I sent a man to find and measure the other," said the sergeant. "If they match, as you say, it will be strong evidence, but we must also have the cart itself and the man who pushed it."

"I will take you to them," I said, "but I believe he is only one-third of a conspiracy. As yet I have no evidence against the others."

"Fear not, my boy," said my father. "Once Cletus gets his hands on him, he will be only too happy to implicate his confederates."

"He is not a man easily intimidated. We must prove he himself pushed the cart or he will simply claim it was taken without his knowledge. I am thinking of a conversation I once had with Leander Slocum."

Galway's eyebrows rose. "What does the city's most famous exterminator of rats have to do with this?"

My father chuckled. "The boy has a logical mind, Cletus. Detectives and rat exterminators contend with somewhat the same species, do they not?"

"Not as far off the mark as you think, Father," I said. "Mr. Slocum once told me his success was due to using the right bait."

Galway's eyes gleamed. "You have the right bait in mind, do you?"

"Myself," I said. "This is an unscrupulous man who has no qualms about performing an evil deed for profit, so will readily believe it in someone else. I shall tell him that I have worked it out but will keep silent if suitably rewarded."

My father waved my words aside. "No. He'll not talk of a reward. He will simply kill you."

"He may try. That is precisely the idea. What better proof of his guilt? Whether he succeeds will be up to you and the sergeant."

We argued for more than an hour before he agreed.

On the way back to the office the previous afternoon, it had occurred to me the body hadn't been disposed of blindly. The murderer had known beforehand of the desolation of that field. Even I, with my extensive knowledge of the city, hadn't known of its existence. Talking to the people in the businesses along the road, we had asked about Deveraux. At the time, I hadn't thought of asking about anyone else. If I had, we'd have made faster progress. When Miss Beeskamp told me Green had worked at Ruffkin and Scott, one of those businesses, there was the answer. He would certainly be familiar with that deserted field.

He was also familiar with Mrs. Deveraux, and that brought something else to mind. "When in doubt, always look for where the money goes," my father had said. Well, Fenwick would inherit the business, but Mrs. Deveraux would inherit far more. Putting those two things together gave me the basis for a hypothesis.

My original thought was that Green himself had transported Deveraux's body, perhaps in a buggy, but after I found the track in the alleyway, the sailor who lived in the house with him immediately came to mind. He had spoken of eking out a living as a peddler, so I knew he had a cart, probably kept in a shed at the rear of the house. When I talked to him, I sensed he lied to protect Green. As my father said, the murderer would be sure to provide himself with an alibi.

He was again sitting on the steps. When he saw me, he indulged in that universal gesture of disgust—he spat.

"Ah, the little liar. Do you think me a fool? I spoke to Lester Green. He is not pursuing a young woman with a younger brother."

With the speed of a striking snake, his hand flashed out to seize my arm, squeezing cruelly. "Now tell me the real reason for your questions."

"I am always on the lookout to make a little money," I said calmly, "something a man like you can appreciate."

"Money? Why should Green give you money, boy?"

"Not Green. You. To keep me from going to the police concerning the death of Mr. Deveraux, Green's employer."

"You'll get a beating from me, not money. I didn't know the man."

"Well, that is obvious. He could hardly have shaken your hand and said how do you do when you transported his dead body in your cart to the field where you left it. The track it left shows the cart used has a piece missing from the tire on the right wheel, which the police will be happy to learn."

He rose, still clutching my arm, his face furious. My argument with my father had been that he would deny even owning a cart, probably knock me into the gutter for my temerity, and rush to inspect the wheel to see if I was right. Finding it so, he would attempt to dispose of the cart immediately. Which was why my father and the sergeant lurked behind the fence in his back yard.

My father's argument had been that men of his type would think only of disposing of us both.

He dragged me through the house and into the back yard.

A canted cart, easily large enough to accommodate a man's body, rested under a lean-to attached to the house, its handle pointing skyward. Still holding my arm, still furious, he rolled it several feet while examining the right wheel. The way his leathery face paled and set into cruel lines told me my father was right. I was in great danger.

I tried to maintain my bravado, but I'm afraid my voice cracked a little. "Since that can send you to the gallows, how much is my silence worth?" I said loudly.

The eyes narrowed. "You've told no one else?"

"I may be young, but I'm too good a businessman for that. How much?"

"Nothing, you young fool!" Before I could make a sound, he pulled me to him and clamped his other hand around my throat. In desperation, I kicked out, my foot thumping against the fence.

Lights flashed before my eyes, which felt as though they would pop out of my head. My lungs screamed for air. I felt myself de-

scending into that black, bottomless pit that faces us all.

Dimly I was aware of a tremendous crash as my father's shoulder demolished a portion of the fence as he plunged through. His angry roar must have frightened horses blocks away as he picked up the sailor and threw him across the yard.

I collapsed, gasping for breath.

He helped me to my feet, his voice strained with worry and concern.

"Are you all right?"

I looked up at him gratefully. Still gasping, I nodded, but never having been choked before, I really wasn't certain. I was certain, though, that fathers very often knew more than their sons.

The rest being police business, my father and I were excluded, but the crosscurrents I had sensed were now revealed.

A feeling of guilt that she had initiated her employer's murder had driven Miss Beeskamp to us. On the night in question she had taken it upon herself to inform him that while he worked late, Lester Green was at his house being entertained by his wife. He'd angrily expressed disbelief, but when he turned up dead, she suspected he might have rushed home.

Indeed he had. He'd walked in on them in a compromising situation.

Mrs. Deveraux's version of what followed had Lester Green taking the derringer Deveraux threatened them with and shooting him in cold blood, in turn threatening to kill her if she spoke the truth. Terror-stricken and in fear for her life, she had followed his directions thereafter. He had forced her to remove Deveraux's clothes—placing them in the wardrobe, where they were subsequently found along with the derringer—while he went for the sailor to assist him in disposing of the body.

Green, however, insisted he had only knocked Deveraux senseless. It was Mrs. Deveraux who had coldly shot him as he lay on the floor because she had long been hoping to acquire his fortune. She offered him a generous share if he disposed of the body and helped conceal the crime. After midnight, he and the sailor loaded the body in the cart, unseen in the darkness behind the house, and the sailor took it to the field.

Mrs. Deveraux then went to the police, playing the role of the distressed wife. By the time the police acted, the body had been disposed of and the sailor and Green were home.

In the eyes of the law, both were equally guilty, but Mrs. Deveraux retained a famed Philadelphia lawyer who successfully painted a pitiable picture of a poor woman under the mesmerizing dominance of a lover. A male jury, swayed by the man's eloquence and completely deficient in any knowledge of human nature, acquitted her, which allowed her to inherit her husband's fortune.

Green was sentenced to death.

The sailor received a long prison term. The most honest of the three, he stated he didn't know or care who pulled the trigger. He considered both fools, as he'd not only be paid for his assistance but could blackmail them both afterward.

But if the scales of justice went askew within the courtroom, they were even more tilted outside.

Our work and my bruised throat netted us nothing—not even the beneficial publicity of having our names mentioned in the paper. The story was cut to the bone because of the upcoming presidential election. Then the editors decided that the inauguration of Mr. Roosevelt deserved far more space than the trial of three depraved individuals who were best disposed of and forgotten.

But Miss Beeskamp fared even worse. She had informed Deveraux of his wife's infidelity out of loyalty—perhaps hoping he'd turn to her. She certainly had no way of knowing it would lead to his death, but convinced herself otherwise. Her self-imposed guilt landed her in an institution where my father faithfully visited her until her depression brought her so low she no longer recognized him.

I attributed his concern to compassion until the morning I was again riding my bicycle along Latimer Street. The sun-dappled ambiance—and the wayward scent of perfume from a passing woman—triggered the memory of the moment when some familiar aura of womanliness about her reminded me of my mother.

And then it struck me that while I had recognized that aura for only a instant, my father would have sensed it from the beginning. That same indefinable attraction had drawn him to my mother.

My throat closed. My immaturity had blinded me to the true depth of his loneliness and feelings, while those crosscurrents and eddies washed over and erased his hopes and dreams.

But out of respect; I fought back the tears. The last thing a father wants is the pity of his son.

FICTION

Death and Transfiguration in Oz

by Alan
Gordon

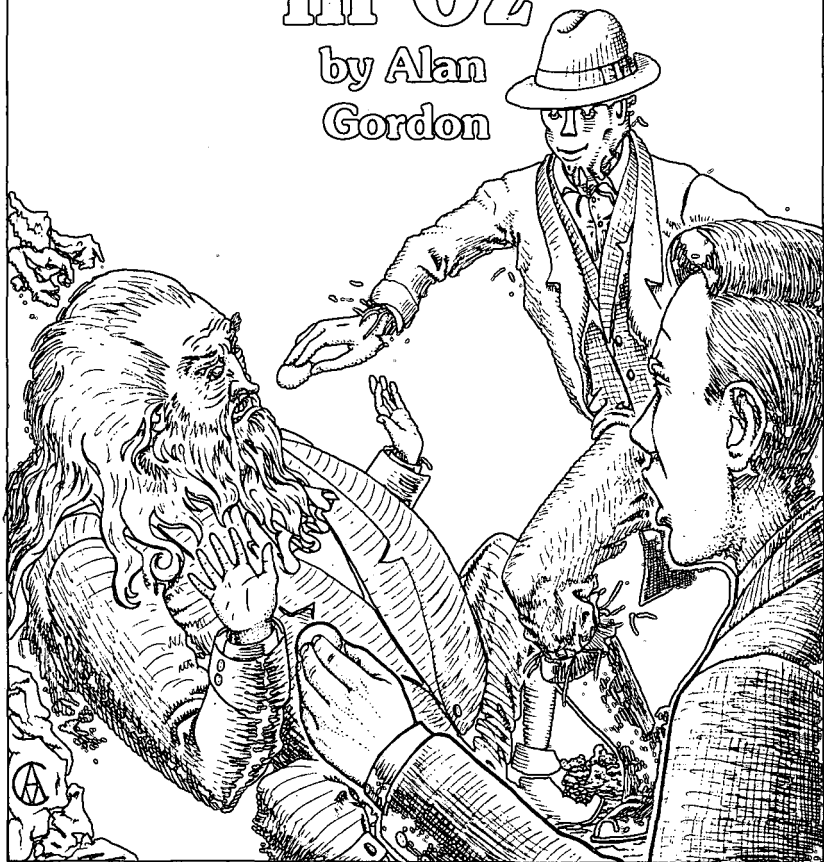


Illustration by Alan M. Clark

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Effie's main qualification for working for me was that she was unflappable. It was the unflappability of her that made me outbid a couple of very high-powered CEO's for her services, so it caused me no little trepidation when I walked into the office late on a Tuesday morning to find out that she was flapped. Very flapped.

"What is it?" I asked softly, keeping my eyes on the door to my office. I could see a vague silhouette of someone sitting there with a broad-brimmed hat tilted low over the face.

"There's someone here to see you," she said in a reasonable facsimile of a matter-of-fact tone. She was barely in control.

"Who?"

"He wouldn't say, but he told me to give you this envelope. He said it had to do with something being held in escrow for you." She held out a plain white envelope that bulged slightly in the middle. Her hand suddenly started shaking, so I snatched the envelope away, then went over to the file cabinet, removed the good rye from the back, and poured some into her Garfield mug. She knocked it back before I could recap the bottle, then sat staring at the fat orange cat, looking for an explanation. I opened the envelope. Inside was an old fashioned shirt button, covered with worn grey cloth.

"Papa always said I was bright as a button, so mamma always called me Button-Bright," I told the strange-looking man. He looked thoughtful.

"Your papa may have been right," he observed, "but there are many kinds of buttons, you see. There are silver and gold buttons, which are highly polished and glitter brightly. There are pearl and rubber buttons and other kinds, with surfaces more or less bright. But there is still another sort of button which is covered with dull cloth, and that must be the sort your papa meant when he said you were bright as a button. Don't you think so?"

"Don't know," I muttered to myself. Effie looked up.

"Bill," she whispered. "I don't think he's human."

"No, Effie," I replied. "He certainly isn't. Hold all calls and cancel all appointments." And I went into my office and closed the door behind me.

He was hunched over on the red leather armchair in front of my desk, a brown fedora shielding his face, and a shapeless grey trenchcoat loosely covering his body. He had white gloves on his hands, and dangling from one of them was a wisp of straw.

"Escrow," I said. "Cute, very cute. I see you still haven't lost your penchant for bad puns. Escrow, meaning S. Crow, am I right?"

"S. Crow, Esquire, at your service," said the Scarecrow, looking up at me. "Hello, Button-Bright."

I had known him for over ninety years, but what they had done to his face scared the hell out of me. Someone must have come up with the bright idea of making him look more human so he could pass among the Philadelphians unnoticed. Fat chance. It still looked like an overstuffed cotton sack, only now with flesh-colored paint. And his left eye was still bigger than the right. The net result was somewhere between a mummy and a mannequin, and if I were still the child I had been for nearly forty years, it would have given me nightmares.

"The hat was a good idea," I said. "How did you get here?"

"Magic belt, of course. Zip, zam, zoom. I appeared in the stairwell about an hour ago. I wanted to miss the morning crush. I'm so easily crushed, you know. I waited for your charming secretary to open the door, and here I am."

"Here you are," I agreed. "Why are you here?"

He looked down at the floor, seemingly hesitant. I was getting more and more worried. Even on his worst days, when the drag of his never-sleeping existence weighed down his frail body, the Scarecrow I knew and loved was unfailingly jolly. He couldn't help it. But now, his mouth turned down, forcing its way against the smiling paint.

"She wants to see you," he said finally.

"Ozma?" I asked. "Suppose I don't want to see her?"

"You'll see her anyway," he responded, pointing at his belt. "Zip, zam, zoom, goodbye, Philly; hello, Oz."

True enough. Once Ozma makes up her mind, she has the absolute power to carry out her wishes. But she never used to be this pushy about it. "Is she watching us?" I asked.

"Magic picture, even as we speak. Sound, too. She's even got a satellite dish to go with it."

I looked up, which was stupid considering that she probably had a frontal view of us. Nevertheless, I looked up. "Okay," I said to the air. "I'm coming, but no magic belt. I want to get there my way."

"Your way? What way is that?" said the Scarecrow, intrigued.

"I don't know yet. Want to come with me?"

"An adventure!" he exclaimed, looking happy for the first time since his arrival. "I haven't had an adventure in thirty years."

"It may not be safe."

"Of course it won't!"

"You'll have to trust me."

"That's danger in itself. I love it. Let's go right now. To Oz!" he shouted, and then began capering clumsily around the office. I told Effie over the intercom that everything was okay. We both knew this to be a complete lie, but she had regained her composure by then. I powered up the terminal and the modem, and ordered the Swiss account to transfer enough into my operational account to keep the office running for a year. I then went to the safe and removed a few necessities: an Uzi with three extra clips of ammo, one with silver bullets; a small box of powder that Glinda had assured me would bring on a rainstorm whenever I needed one; and a small cloth bag with a drawstring top. The rest of my supplies were at the farm. I closed the safe, and we went back out to Effie's domain. She looked fine, but kept her eyes fixed on me.

"Effie, I'm taking one of my little trips," I told her.

"Okay. About how long?"

"Don't know. Shouldn't be more than six months. Look, the operating account will keep the rent paid for a while, along with your salary, so not to worry about that. But I want you to have these as career insurance, just in case." I handed her the cotton bag. She opened it and poured its contents into her hand. Whaddya know, flapped again. That made twice in one morning.

"But—but these are emeralds," she stuttered.

"The very best emeralds. If you haven't heard from me in a year, cash them in and retire, travel, get married, whatever. Like I said, insurance."

"Bill, don't go," she whispered.

"Don't have a choice. Catch you on the rebound." And we left her counting the shiny green stones.

"Why do you call her Effie?" asked the Scarecrow. "It's not her real name."

"S'okay," I answered as we entered the garage. "Bill's not mine, either."

I put the top up on the Jag for the sake of my passenger. Fast cars are nice, but they're hell on an easily airborne companion. I flipped a tape at random into the cassette player, then heard Chet Baker playing "Let's Get Lost" and realized it wasn't random at

all. Too appropriate, in fact. I caught him a few times in Paris during an earlier identity crisis, haunted by his doomed, expatriate style. Like everyone I have ever liked, he died, violently, mysteriously, and nobody was particularly surprised at the how of it. I figured they would someday feel the same way about me, assuming anyone knew me well enough to feel anything at all. I supposed I could fool them all and live forever, but I had left Oz to avoid precisely that fate.

We followed the Schuylkill River until we met up with I-76, headed past King of Prussia, then turned north on 422. I turned the Jag loose, and forty minutes later we had passed Reading and were heading northwest on 61. The Schuylkill split into its two branches, then petered off towards the northeast. Hills rose around us, and when I saw the signs for Lost Creek, I knew we were close. The Scarecrow had been quietly observing the scenery roll by, chuckling occasionally at some of the more lurid truckstop/peep-show billboards. I took a series of back roads that descended the evolutionary pavement scale, concrete to asphalt to gravel to dirt, picked a particularly weed-strewn turnoff, and pulled into my farm.

The house was small, a ranch-style clapboard building, desperately needing a coat of paint. The barn was equally decrepit, and only a close examination would have revealed that the lock was both formidable and new. I unlocked it, moved the Jag inside, and closed the barn door behind us. We headed into the house. I filled a lantern, then carefully lit it as the Scarecrow stood a safe distance away. There were no electric lights. There was, in fact, no electricity, gas, phone, or anything else that would require some company to send me bills. The water was pumped from a well that had been dug a hundred years ago.

"I have two questions," said the Scarecrow. "Where are we, and why are we here?"

"This is my farm," I said proudly. "I don't grow anything here, although I expect it could be done. But this is where I come to get away from this world, to renew, and occasionally to change identities. Periodically, I transfer the deed from an old persona to a new one, just to keep it in the family without attracting any attention. And it has one special feature."

"Which is?"

"I'll show you in the morning. Good night, Scarecrow."

As I left him, he had found a mirror and was scraping the paint from his face.

I arose at dawn, went to the kitchen. No Scarecrow. I called for him, then went outside. To the east, silhouetted against the sunrise, was a figure spread-eagled on a decaying wooden pole. I ran towards him, panicked. He was staring at the sun which was already shrinking as it ascended the prism of the atmosphere. His feet were about a foot off the ground, and I looked behind him to see the rusty nail that held him up. He started as I began working him loose.

"Good day," he said.

"And to you," I responded. "Who did this to you?"

"I did." I stopped and stood back to look at him. He looked about normal for a scarecrow. He smiled sadly. "Every now and again I do this. Just to remember what it was like. A simple life, unencumbered by knowledge, watching the sun rise and set. They grew corn here at one time, didn't they?"

"A long time ago. It was the sweetest corn I ever had." I reached forward and lifted him off of the nail and down to earth.

"Just call me Barabbas," he murmured, looking back at the pole as we walked to the house.

"Who's that?" I asked.

He paused before answering. "Are you religious at all?"

"Not particularly."

"Why not?"

"Why should I be?"

"To get into heaven someday."

I had never heard him speak like this. I had a sense of being tested, or possibly warned about something. "Heaven," I said. "That's a place where you're rewarded for being good before you die. A place of beauty where you join the angels and live for eternity."

"So they say."

"If I want that, I can always go back to Oz. And never bother with this dying business."

He laughed suddenly. "So you think Oz is heaven, do you?" He howled and shook, straw leaking from his clothes at a dangerous rate. I began patting him back into shape.

"No," I answered. "Do you?"

*

Two miners' helmets with extra batteries for the lamps. Two coils of a lightweight, synthetic rope, tested at five hundred kilos. Climbing gear. Two fireproof suits that rolled into a pair of aluminum canisters for a total weight of three kilos. About six hours of compressed air. K-rations, a few hardboiled eggs, a canteen, vitamin pills, Glinda's magic powder, waterproof matches, and a couple of large, extra-strength Hefty bags. And, of course, the Uzi. Total weight: fifteen kilos. Traveling with the Scarecrow meant I wouldn't need the sleeping bag—it was like having your own personal hayloft. He couldn't carry much himself, but then he ate and drank nothing, so he wasn't a burden, either.

He watched me load up. "You still haven't told me where we're going, or how it will get us to Oz."

"You've forgotten about my special talent."

We left the house and headed towards a small copse of woods that partially climbed the hillside.

"What special talent? I always thought that you were remarkably devoid of talent for someone living in Oz."

"Yet I kept turning up there, didn't I?"

"True enough. Like a bad penny, we used to say."

"Think, O Brainy One. How do people get from the earthly realms to the magical?"

He put his finger on his chin and scrunched up his face as he always did when thinking. The pins in the mixture the Wizard had made for him protruded through his forehead. "Magic," he said. "Tornado. Shipwreck. Earthquake. Volcanic eruption, on one occasion that I can remember."

"And there's me. I never got there by any of those methods."

"That's true," he said in surprise. "I never thought of that. You always just turned up because you had gotten lost somehow."

"And that's my special talent." We had pushed through the trees to the side of the hill. There, overgrown and nearly hidden from view, was the entrance to an old, abandoned coal mine. I pulled away some of the brush, handed a miner's helmet to the Scarecrow, and flipped on the lamp on mine. He was staring at the entrance somewhat dubiously. I gestured to him to enter.

"Where does this go?" he asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I replied. "Let's get lost."

We traveled into the hillside, choosing our turns and descents at random, but moving constantly downwards. The mine had been abandoned for over a century, played out and then discarded as

unprofitable when petroleum began its reign. I had known about it since I was a child in the first decade of the last century, and had frequently sought its entrance without ever summoning up the courage to go in. What better place to lose oneself?

About two hours into our journey we heard a distant roaring, and the air began to feel stuffy. The temperature was climbing as well.

"Some kind of huge beast?" quavered the Scarecrow.

"Not a beast," I said as I decanted the fireproof suits. "But it does eat straw." I handed one to him and started to put mine on. He read the instructions, then suddenly started shouting.

"Fire? One match will end my life, but no, Button-Bright, you bring me into the granddaddy of all infernos! Why did I do this?" He put the suit on furiously, muttering imprecations against my lineage. I agreed with a few of them, as it happened. I hooked up the first air canister and we moved on.

The inferno had been raging for a long time. We weren't far from a place called Centralia, where a fire started underground over forty years ago, and had continued to the present, following the endless seams of coal that interlaced the area. Cave-ins had connected the mines, and a natural network of tunnels brought in oxygen. No one knew just how far and how deep those tunnels ran.

We skirted the edges of the blaze. Once the Scarecrow saw that he was safe, his stride took on a jaunty appearance, and he even started picking up glowing coals and heaving them around, laughing at his old enemy. We found an entrance to an ancient gallery, still propped up by thick, smoldering timbers. We crossed through it, and had traveled some thirty feet when it crashed down behind us. We looked at each other and grinned like idiots. There was no turning back now.

The heat began to dissipate, and soon it was cool enough to remove the helmets. I had finished the first air canister and discarded it. There seemed to be enough air to breathe here, emanating from an unusually rough-hewn shaft off to our right. I looped a rope around a crossbeam and threw the rest of it down the shaft.

"I'll go first," said the Scarecrow.

"Okay, I'll hold the rope for you."

"You forget yourself," he chortled merrily, and then jumped into the shaft. I counted Mississippis and got to four before I heard the soft thud; then I clipped on my harness. When I got to the bottom, he was still patting himself back into shape. There were two tun-

nels, and without thinking I chose the left one. Not that it would have mattered.

The air was still good. I had about four hours of air left in the canisters, but I was hoping to save it for emergencies. We stopped so I could wolf down some rations and water. The Scarecrow was examining the walls.

"I didn't know humans had ever mined this deep," he commented.

"Coal ruled this area for decades. No one knows to what extent the mines go."

"What happens when we reach the end?"

"Don't know. Don't worry, you're with me."

He immediately looked worried.

We continued on. The roar of the fire had faded away, and we heard only the sound of our footsteps and the rhythmic crinkling of the straw for what seemed like hours until an irregular chinking noise came to us from a gallery to our right. We followed the noise to its source, and came upon a wizened, not quite human figure, sitting against the wall and chipping at a cheap looking gemstone with a stone chisel. His clothes were in tatters, and his skin was so much the color of the rock face behind him that only his movement enabled us to see him. He looked at me without recognition, but upon seeing the Scarecrow, he leapt up with a howl of rage and hurled the chisel at him. It missed by inches and thudded against the far wall.

"Cursed Ozites!" he screamed, jumping up and down. "Must you haunt me even in my exile?" And the Gnome King, for it was our old enemy, sat down and wept muddy tears.

"Roquat the Red, as I live and . . . well, anyway, what are you doing here?" said the Scarecrow in astonishment.

"Plotting my revenge," sobbed the other. "Revenge against you, and Ozma, and Dorothy, and the whole stinking do-goody lot of you! What should I be doing?"

"Atoning for your sins," lectured the Scarecrow sternly. "I didn't know that you had been banished to the earthly realms, but I certainly approve. How long have you been down here?"

"Fifty years, damn you! Fifty years trying to find the magic to get back. But look at this!" He took the gemstone in his hand, gestured frantically over it and muttered a few dark incantations. There was a feeble red glow, then a puff of smoke as it shattered in his hand.

"You see?" he growled. "Inferior product. How can I build another magic belt with this low-grade stuff?"

"This fire," I said as a nasty thought occurred to me. "Is it your doing?"

He bared his teeth in what I supposed was a smile. "One of my successes. Rather good, if I do say so myself. Even better was that little incident I arranged near Harrisburg in the seventies." My blood chilled a bit.

"What's he talking about?" asked the Scarecrow.

"Three Mile Island? That was you? You could have wiped out the whole state." He bowed modestly. The Scarecrow shot me a look. I reached into my pack, pulled out two of the hardboiled eggs and gave one to the Scarecrow, who sauntered up to the Gnome King as he straightened up and shoved it into his mouth. I ran forward with the other, but it wasn't necessary. Roquat was old beyond old, and his long suffering left him easy prey. And eggs were still poison to gnomes.

He fell back against the wall, then crumpled into an untidy heap. In repose, I could see momentarily the bones and sinews under the skin. Then a network of hairline cracks spread across his features, and he crumbled in upon himself, his body collapsing into a shallow pile of dust.

"The way to dusty death indeed," said the Scarecrow. "I never thought we'd ever see him dead. Every time we'd defeat him, he'd find a new way of attacking us. We always called it his mischief, but he almost conquered all of us on a few occasions. I'm glad I could put him out of his misery. I suppose that's why you brought the eggs, Button-Bright. Very good."

"Odd," I commented. "I remember his being a fat man, sort of like a rock-colored Santa Claus. He mustn't have been eating too well down here. Lord knows what he could have eaten."

"You believe in Santa Claus, don't you?"

He had the look on his face that he had when he was asking me about religion.

"Of course I do."

"But you don't believe in Christ? Or God?"

"No."

"Why do you believe in Santa Claus, then?"

"Because I've met Santa Claus," I snapped. "At Ozma's birthday party, the first time I came to Oz, remember?"

"But you didn't like him, did you?" he said, probing.

"No, I didn't," I answered a bit reluctantly, not liking where this was going.

"Why not?"

I was having trouble getting the words out. I was suddenly a little boy in a sailor suit, watching in terror as a huge man with a white beard and a red suit whispered the secrets of my origin to the Wizard. Secrets that had brought on my special talent, only now to be thwarted by a conspiracy of old, magical men.

"He knew where I lived," I said finally.

"And where did you live?"

"In Philadelphia."

"With your mamma and papa," he said thoughtfully. "Now, there's an interesting point. All the other children who came to Oz were orphans. Not you. We sent you home, but you came back. Then you didn't go back home, you stayed in Oz for decades. Then you became the only one to go back to the earthly realms. Why?"

"You're the genius," I said as I began to walk again.

"That's right, I am," he said, pleased with himself. "I don't know why I never thought of this before. You didn't want to go back home, did you?"

"Nope."

"Yet you went back eventually. Something happened, either in Oz or on Earth. Were you waiting for your parents to die?"

He was about one square away from bingo.

"Or was it just your father, the one who gave you that appalling sobriquet?"

"Bingo," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Correct, or very close. Except I wasn't waiting for him to die. I went back to kill him."

The Scarecrow walked with me in silence for a while. I peeked sideways at him, trying to gauge his reaction. It wasn't shock. Killing was not foreign to him. He had twisted, one by one, the necks of a flock of crows that had attacked Dorothy. He had helped destroy more than one witch. And I had just seen his summary execution of an enemy of Oz. His concerns were for problems and solutions, not sentimentality. He left that to his friend, the Tin Woodman. No, he was assimilating this new piece of information that I had just given him, trying to reconcile it to the boy he knew for fifty years, the man he'd known for forty.

Meanwhile, our path had continued to descend, and gradually a new and different roaring began swelling ahead of us. The tunnel looked more natural than man-made, but it could also have been the work of that mad and ancient gnome. It twisted at angles that would have frustrated any regular carting of coal. After about fourteen or so shifts in direction, I had no idea which way we were going except down. Then we turned one last corner and came upon a river of black water, rushing from a cascade to our right down to a tunnel on the left.

"I like water only a little more than fire," mourned the Scarecrow. "I hate getting wet. Maybe we should go back."

"I never go back," I said, and I pulled out the plastic trash-bags. The Scarecrow looked at them dubiously.

"I don't like it," he said finally.

"Hey, you've got it easy. I'm the one who needs to breathe."

He sighed and climbed into one. I pulled the edges up around him, then started dumping my equipment in with him. Ballast, to keep him from floating on top where the rocks might tear him apart. I was still wearing the suit—it was fireproof, but I didn't know how well it would do underwater. I hooked up one tank of air and tossed the others in with the Scarecrow, then pulled the plastic drawstrings tight around him. I tied the top of the bag with one end of the remaining rope, then looped the rest of it several times around my waist.

"Are you ready?" I yelled. There was a muffled response from the bag. I shoved it into the water and jumped in before I could think about what I was doing. And after that, it was too late. I actually did have a few second thoughts in the few seconds it took to be sucked into the tunnel, but then we dived into the darkness. My last memory was of wondering if there was enough clearance for my head. Apparently, there wasn't.

I came to with a splitting headache and a profound sense of gratitude that I was feeling anything at all. I was lying on my back on a beach, and briefly thought I had dreamed it all. The purplish tint of the Nonestic Ocean and my fireproof suit quickly brought me back to reality. I peeled off the suit, rolled it up, and then untied the top of the battered but still intact container of my companion. He looked up at me quietly, alert. Straw never sleeps. The Uzi was in his hands, and the barrel was pointed at my chest. I stepped back as he stood up.

"Good day," he said.

"And to you," I replied.

"I've been thinking," he said.

"It's what you do best," I replied.

"I want to know what happened between you and your father, why you left Oz to kill him, whether you did kill him, and if you pose any threat to Oz now. If you do, I will kill you. If you don't answer me, I will kill you. If you make me go through any more tunnels, fire, or water, I will kill you."

"Happy to oblige," I said. "But first, do you know how many kilos of force it takes to pull the trigger of that thing?"

"What?" he shouted, but I was already diving forward and to my right. The Uzi did have a fairly stiff trigger-pull—near to impossible if you have straw hands. I took it away fairly easily, then pointed it at him.

He puffed out his chest defiantly. "Bullets can't kill me," he blustered.

"But can you survive the flash?" He sagged visibly.

"You didn't even manage to get the safety off," I continued. "Now, stop this nonsense. I am not now, nor have I ever been, an enemy of Oz."

"Did you kill your father or not?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. I had been missing for forty years. Then I showed up on my parents' doorstep as the same young boy I had been when I vanished. My old man took one look at me and dropped dead on the spot. My mamma survived the shock. Pretty much the effect I had been counting on."

"Why?"

"Pick up that bag, walk a little ahead of me, and I'll tell you."

I tossed the oxygen tanks. I knew the journey from now on would be above ground. We were on a fairly isolated part of the Ev coastline, about a three hour hike from the Deadly Desert that surrounded Oz. I munched on some rations as we walked.

"Like you said, I was the only kid to go to Oz and leave his family behind. I had my reasons. My father was a drunken, violent man. He started beating me when I was two. Other things happened later, worse things. Then one day I discovered my special talent and got lost."

"You mean, you ran away."

"Lots of kids run away. I got lost. I could lose my father, my home, the whole damn planet. I found other places. Oz was one,

Sky Island another, and there are others that you've never even heard of. I had a knack for crossing over without knowing exactly how I did it, although I figured out that at some point in the trip I had to lose consciousness. That seems to be a necessary part for all of us who cross accidentally. Dorothy blacked out in the tornado and the shipwreck; so did the others. But I came back, mostly to try to help Mamma. It got to be too much for me, so I left for good."

"And forty years later?"

"I wanted to go back to Earth. I needed Mamma so I could re-establish myself there. I didn't want him around. I had a knife and I was ready to use it. I didn't have to."

"And your mother?"

I thought back fifty years. Twin shocks, the death of her husband, the reappearance of her child. She welcomed them both. "She helped me. She put what property they had in my new name, adopted me legally to avoid too many explanations. I took care of her, sold some emeralds to support the two of us, and played the tedious part of a teenager until my body had caught up to my mind. She died shortly afterwards, and I made my first identity switch. The rest you know."

We walked on, the Scarecrow sagging under the minimal weight of his bag, me with one hand resting on the Uzi. Eventually, we arrived at the edge of the Deadly Desert. I had crossed it twice before, both times with assistance from magic. The old ways are the best ways. I pulled out the box that Glinda had given me, read the instructions, and tossed a pinch of blue powder into the air.

As always, Glinda's sorcery was reliable. The rain came immediately. We ducked under the trash bag, and waited about half an hour for it to stop. The Scarecrow didn't question me on this one—he knew what was going to happen.

As the sun emerged from behind the trailing edge of the clouds, a massive rainbow formed, one end touching down right by us. Flitting about on the end of it, barely visible even when you knew what you were looking for, were the daughters of the rainbow, dancing and dabbing their dainty little feet on the ground. I hollered, "Polychrome!" and one of them looked at us.

"Button-Bright?" she shrieked. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to get to Oz. Can you give us a lift?"

She beckoned to us in response, and we dashed over to her. Several pairs of ethereal hands clasped ours, and we found ourselves soaring into the air. The desert rushed away beneath us.

Polychrome took my face between her hands, kissed me gently, then drew back and perused my face somewhat sadly. "You were such a beautiful child," she sighed. "You should never have grown up."

"When he was a child, he spoke like a child, but he became a man to give up childish ways, isn't that right, Button-Bright?" chirped the Scarecrow.

"Something like that," I said. "I've missed you, Polly."

"Well, I don't come down to ground any more. It's just not as much fun as it was. Things are peaceful down there, which is nice, but it's boring. Sometimes I wish the Gnome King would come back, just to give us a challenge."

"Not likely," muttered the Scarecrow.

"Oh?" she trilled. Then her face fell when she saw the expression on mine. "Oh. I see. I thought search and destroy missions weren't your sort of thing, Button-Bright."

"It wasn't like that," I said defensively. "We just happened upon him. Coincidence."

"That's what you think," she snapped. "It was probably..." Then she stopped, and I turned just in time to see the remains of a warning on the Scarecrow's beaming visage. I didn't like that one bit, but we were descending towards the outskirts of the Emerald City and I couldn't do much about the direction I had taken. Maybe I never could.

We slid down to the ground. Polychrome clung to the end of the rainbow with one hand and kissed me again. It felt like a butterfly alighting on my mouth for a fragment of a dream. "Goodbye, Button-Bright. Maybe when you're through here, we could..." Then she blushed a deep red and blended into that end of the spectrum as the rainbow faded away.

"I think her father keeps her on a very tight leash nowadays," observed the Scarecrow. "She used to run wild. Of course, we all did back then."

"Do you miss it?" I asked, a bit harshly.

He glanced almost fearfully in the direction of the city and shook his head.

The final leg of the journey was the shortest and easiest. We simply walked a few meters to the main gate and knocked loudly. The soldier with the green whiskers let us in, shook our hands, and waved us toward the palace. The city looked exactly the same as when I had last been here, some fifteen years ago. I saw a baby

of nine months conversing intelligently from her carriage with a blackbird, and I shuddered. I had spent forty years as a child. She had spent ninety as a baby. There are worse hells than that, but I'd rather not imagine them.

The people seemed calm, almost somnambulant. Some stared at me, trying to place who I was, or had been, but no one recognized me. We arrived at the palace in the center of the city, ascended its green marble steps, and entered the main hall.

Dorothy was there, sprawled across a plush green pillow, unenthusiastically playing jacks. She looked up as we entered, and nodded, expressionless.

"It took you long enough," she said. "But I 'spect you got lost on the way like you usually do. Nice trip?"

"Oh, the nicest," purred the Scarecrow. "Interesting sights, a pleasant traveling companion, extreme personal danger—what more could a humble pilgrim want?"

"Danger? Really?" she exclaimed, perking up. "You will tell me ev'rything, of course. My goodness, why, I haven't been in danger since . . . well, it's been the longest time, Scarecrow, and I get just goose bumps thinking 'bout it. Have you told him 'bout Ozma?"

"Not in great detail."

"Almost nothing," I said. "What exactly is going on, and why does she want to see me?"

She frowned. "It's sort of difficult to 'splain, and I'm not at all sure I can get it 'zactly right. How old do I look, Button-Bright?"

"About twelve or thirteen."

"Hm. You look to be about forty or so. Funny, isn't it? I'm four years older than you are, and look at us. Well, you'd best go see Ozma straight away before she loses her temper."

"Wait, Ozma lose her temper? Since when did she ever do that?"

Dorothy clapped her hands over her mouth, suddenly terrified, glancing all around her. "Oh, my God. Oh, God, I hope she didn't hear me. Please, Button-Bright, go see her now."

I left them together and proceeded up the grand staircase to Ozma's chamber. As I entered, she was seated with her back to me, looking at the Magic Picture, which was hung on the wall opposite where I was standing. I looked at it, and saw myself looking back at me from the doorway where I was standing. Then Ozma stood and turned towards me.

There have never been words in any language capable of describing her beauty, and I was, as usual, overwhelmed by it. But there

was something different about her. She moved forward to greet me, and I did a quick memory check of my last visit to Oz. She was taller. She was fuller-figured than before. She was . . .

"You're older!" I said in astonishment. She smiled and kissed me. It was no ordinary greeting. It was soft and sweet, and by the time it ended, I was dizzy. She turned, setting off a series of twirls in her gown as she opened a cabinet and pulled out a bottle and two glasses.

"How do you like it?" she asked, pouring some green liqueur into the glasses.

"Incredible. You've grown up. How did you do that? Nobody is supposed to age here."

"No," she said, handing me a glass. "Nobody ever gets older, and nobody ever dies, as long as one of my race is on the throne. That's why you left, isn't it? You didn't want to be trapped in the body of a little boy any more." She beckoned, and I sat next to her on a divan that could have seated an army.

"Partly," I answered. "But why did you get older? And how?"

"As for how," she said, "I am, after all, the most powerful fairy in Oz. It was a simple matter. As for why—do you find me attractive in this form?"

"God, yes."

"Oh, good," she sighed, nestling into my shoulder, sipping her drink.

"You did this for me? I can't believe it."

"Button-Bright—and we will have to start calling you something else from now on—you were the only person ever to leave here. I wanted to know why, so I've watched you constantly, watched you grow, watched you live, watched you have adventures."

"You don't have adventures any more?"

"No," she cried. "There are no adventures left in Oz. We've explored every nook and cranny, conquered every enemy, melted every witch. We're stable, happy, and contented, and I've been bored out of my mind. And then, I watch you. Oh, Button-Bright, you've done so much, braved so many dangers, just for the pure love of it. And . . ." She faltered for a second, looking up at me shyly. "And I've watched you late at night, when you, when you've been with . . ." She blushed, and took a long sip of her drink.

I took a sip of mine for the first time, partly to give me time to think about what she was saying, partly to cover the deep embarrassment. I thought that those moments were private, and didn't

like the idea that Ozma had been observing me and getting these ideas. The drink tasted odd.

"What is this, absinthe?" I asked suddenly. She nodded, pleased.

"How long have you been drinking this? It's poison, it has worm-wood in it."

"Oh, I've been drinking it for years. It doesn't affect me at all," she said blithely. "Button-Bright, don't wander from the subject."

"What exactly is the subject?"

"Me," she said firmly. "Me. And you. With me. Together."

"Why me? Why not anyone from around here?"

"Because there are no real men around here," she hissed. "They're all either too old, or too ugly, or they're missing things." She shuddered. "They're afraid of me, but they serve me and pretend that everything is all happiness and light. The truth is, they all just sit around and moan about how dull things have become. You're the only real man I know, Button-Bright. I want you with me in Oz, to be my lover and consort, to share the throne, the power, the wealth, and the beauty. Rule with me, Button-Bright, and I shall rule, and be ruled by you. All that I can be will be yours if you stay by my side. What do you say?"

It was a stunning offer. I looked at her, and she seemed to grow visibly more beautiful with each passing moment. I had dreamed of the gold-plated, emerald-encrusted city from the moment I first saw it as a child. It would mean an end to wandering, an end to rootlessness, to worrying about what the future held, to aging, to death. So, the answer was simple.

"No," I said, not quite believing my own ears.

She couldn't believe hers, either. "You're rejecting me?" she quavered, tears welling up in her eyes.

"No," I said. "Just the offer. I would give almost anything to be with you, but I can't stay in one place forever. Where would the adventure be? What happens to the fun? There are still worlds I haven't explored, Ozma."

"But I can bring them to you," she cried. "Nothing is beyond my power."

"Come with me back to America, and share my travels. We can be together there."

"America?" she whispered. "But I'll have no magic in America. I'll grow old. I'll become ugly. I'll die."

"I doubt that you'll become ugly."

"And if I leave here, then everyone else will grow old and die. They might even get killed before that."

"I think they'd be grateful for the opportunity. Come with me, Ozma. You'll like Philadelphia, they've done a lot with the waterfront."

"But I won't be queen any more!" she shouted.

"So what?"

"So what? Button-Bright, I am staying right here where I can do what I want and have what I want, where people will risk their necks to get me birthday presents and jewels and do whatever I tell them. And I want you with me."

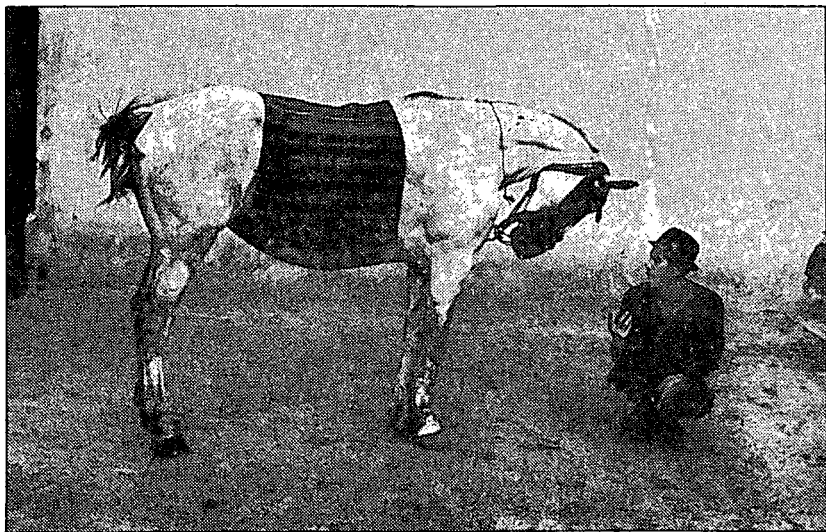
"Life without adventure isn't living," I said. "I can't do it. I'm sorry." I got up, and started to walk away. I heard her rise, stamp her foot, and call my name. I turned, and with a sudden sinking feeling saw that she had both hands on a jeweled belt that I hadn't noticed before. She started muttering something, and instinctively I started to run. Then the palace faded around me.

I was standing on a jagged chunk of black rock. The sun was beating down at such a rate that my boots were already beginning to smolder from the heat. Stretching out to the horizon on all sides was desert, unbroken by any topographical feature besides the one I was standing on. As bad as that was, it didn't concern me nearly as much as the giant creatures slithering up the rock in my direction. They seemed to be half obsidian and half maw. I loosed a few shots that bounced harmlessly off their hides. I changed the clip for the one with the silver bullets and tried again. This only seemed to encourage them.

Ozma's voice echoed around me. "Well, Button-Bright, you want adventure, you got adventure."

"Can we talk about this?" I shouted, but the only answer were those famous silvery peals of laughter that I knew so well, fading away to be replaced by the mournful clarity of the Chet Baker recording I had played when I left Philadelphia, a lifetime ago. I wanted to get lost. Now, I was as lost as I had ever been. And I remembered much too late a piece of advice that the Wizard had once given me one dark night while he sat deep in his cups and mourned his lost empire. You don't ever cross a fairy, he told me. You just don't.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

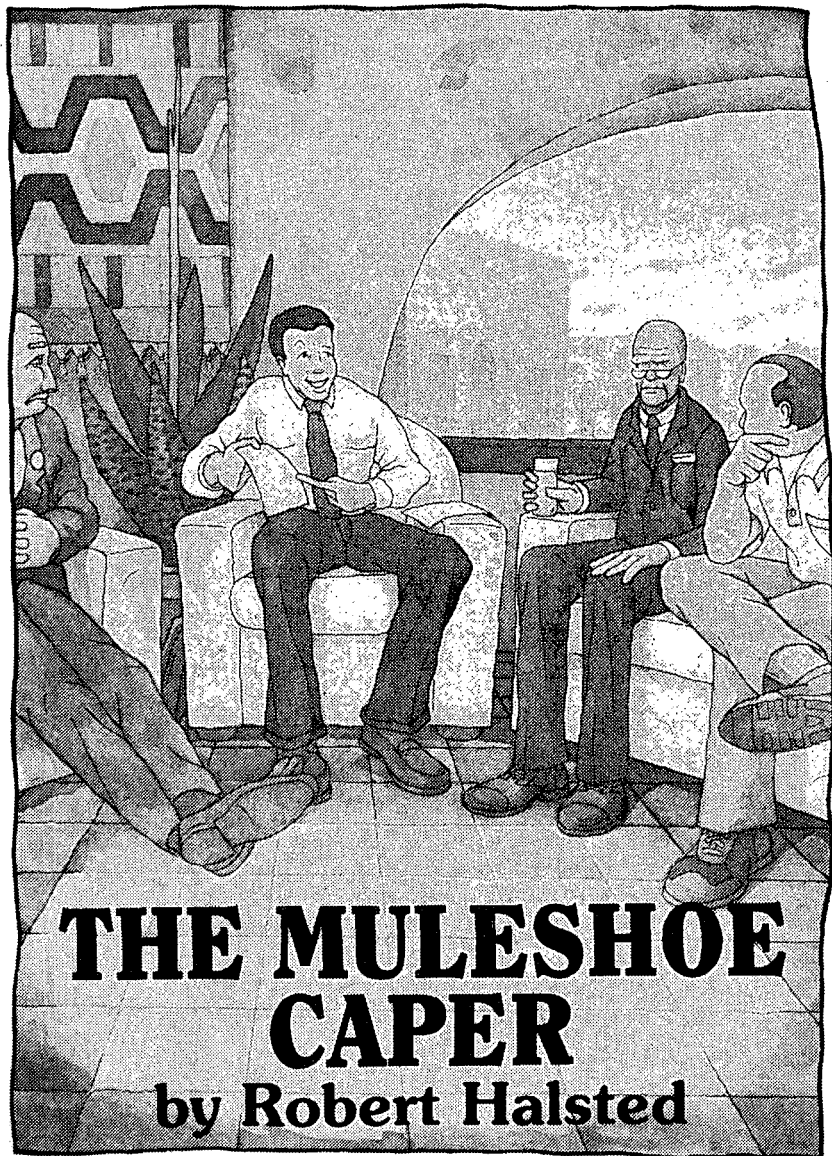


Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

The conference. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION



THE MULESHOE CAPER

by Robert Halsted

Illustration by Jim Adams

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“**D**ayum,” said Joy Sue.

I looked up from my second reading of the *Journal*. A very pedestrian issue today, nothing suggesting a toehold for a scam. “Hm?”

She glanced at her watch, picked up the phone, looked up a number in the Rolodex and punched it out. “Ah hope Ah’m not too late,” she said. “That’s three periods in a row Ah’ve missed, and it’s time to consult a professional.”

“What!”

She waved a hand to shush me and shifted from her Appalachian to her Eastern Finishing School mode. “Ah, you’re still open. This is Miss Witt at Brown & Witt, Ltd. If you wouldn’t mind adding it to our order for delivery tomorrow, I need a new daisy wheel for our Royal. The lower case period is totally worn out, and the comma is getting weak. . . . You have our model number in your data bank? Thank you very much.”

She rang off, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Nothin’ to get upset about, darlin’.” She patted my cheek. “They only cost a few dollars. I reck’n we c’n afford it, grossin’ a quarter million a year, ’tween earnin’s on capital and the business we’re doing now.”

As if to illustrate her point, the phone rang just then and she took an order for a purchase of Amalgamated Coal Tar to net us half a grand. She had the whole job done electronically in about three minutes.

“That’s just it,” I complained as soon as she’d finished the keyboard paperwork. “Do you realize that—not looking too deeply into the provenance of our working capital—every penny we’ve made in the last seven or eight months has been, no matter how unconventional, totally legal?”

She patted my knees to uncross them, sat on my lap, and put a comforting arm around me. “Kinda hurts yore pride, don’t it?”

I blew an idle breath down her charming decolletage. “It’s not just pride. I’ve lived for years at a time on legal money, and my self-esteem survived it. No, what bothers me is plain old fear. I could lose my touch, get gun-shy. I have this gut feeling I’ve got to do something *big*, really crooked, very soon, or I’m washed up.”

She massaged a soft warm portion of herself with me, just to keep us in practice. “It’s only been a few months since you stole a whole banana republic. You wouldn’t fergit that, would you?”

"I'd count it if we'd actually stolen it. All it amounted to, really, was just sort of appointing ourselves as receivers pending return to the rightful owners, even if we did net a million or so in the process. Before you re-invested."

"So now we legally own part of it." She blew in my ear. "Did I tell you it's payin' off now? That casino you thought up, p'ticlerly. As soon as we git the dividend check, I think we oughta cruise down and do a little more reinvestin'. I never played rowlette before."

Very carefully I nipped her well snubbed and cuter than average nose with my teeth. "If you don't mind, I've had enough Latin America for a while. Maybe in a month or two?"

"Well, what I was really sayin'—you just sorta seem to need some *restorin'*. Maybe we could close the office for a while an' just kinda freshen you up temporary?"

I searched her face, up close, for the truth of her motivation. Her eyes were a very American sort of true blue, and the lashes weren't nearly as fake as they looked. The snubness of her nose has already been noted as authentic. The lips, as a cupid's bow, weren't totally credible—the bowstring was far too extroverted—but as lips go, they

were as believable as most women's.

"I suppose," I began cautiously, "we could take a little break. I guess Irv would hold the fort for us for a couple of hours."

"Ah had in mind more like a few days. Where's in season?"

I thought for a moment. "It's dry season in the Caribbean—too hot, and I've had enough of it for a while. Outer Banks are coming in, Florida isn't totally finished yet, Easter's late this year. It's still too cold in New England and Canada..."

By now she was avidly scanning the local paper for weather reports. "El Paso to Sandy Ego, it's still cold nights and hot days. We got any money for plane fare?"

"Only a hundred grand or so liquid cash, current balance, not counting the sixty grand you've got hidden behind the TP dispenser."

"Ah'd better look for touris' class reservation then."

I wasn't quite ready for it, but within minutes she had departed for the travel agency, and before dark we had reservations for a resort somewhere in the sand dunes east of Yuma, for grief's sake; rental car, plane tickets—she went first after all because she likes to get me boozed up so she can manipulate me, I think, even though

buying the drinks would cost less than the fare difference—and she'd honeyed up Irv Cohen shamelessly. He's always ready to stand in for us by a call forwarding arrangement and has even offered at times to take care of Joy Sue in case I need some time off.

If she hadn't had clever ways of distracting me, I wouldn't have been aboard the 727 the middle of the next morning. But it was lucky that I was—her fear of takeoffs had suddenly taken a turn for the worse, and she needed incredible amounts of smooching to live through it. Smooching Joy Sue through a takeoff is a demanding process, and the stewardess arrived with the first freebies none too soon.

What can you say about twenty-five hundred miles by air? There was sky up above us, though mostly concealed by the plane roof. There were clouds and ground below us, which began after a few hundred leagues to look like reruns. We changed at DFW. Joy Sue was so fascinated by the automatic tram that we took two round trips while we spent more time waiting for our connecting flight than we had in the air.

It was twilight, one of those grandiose lonesome desert twilights, when we deplaned at Yuma. Somehow all at the

same time there was chilly air blowing in from the desert and ovenlike heat radiating from the parking lot when we loaded our luggage into the rental car and put the top down for the view. Reservations verified and a terra firma meal in us, we consulted the map and went forth into the wilderness. And went, and went.

Finally I pulled over to the side of the road. It was a good view, a melon-slice of moon on a purple-black sea full of stars—no smog—and on the dry rolling hills a few silhouetted saguaros that had escaped the cactus rustlers. But I was more interested in the map.

"Are you sure you're navigating right?" I asked Joy Sue.

"Ain't but one road," she answered. "The brochure did say it was a li'l *isolated*. 'Bout 'nother twenty mile now."

We'd already come nearly eighty. "Why didn't we just drive *all* the way," I asked petulantly, "instead of flying west and driving halfway back east?"

If my snit of pique ruffled her, she didn't show it. She lifted my starboard wing and tucked herself under it in a most snuggly fashion, and I realized we were, after all, on vacation without any deadlines. The Western miles were longer than Eastern ones but much

less cluttered, and I sort of turned off my cares, velvet night above us and my girl under my arm, for the rest of the trip.

Our car disappeared into the white-gloved hands of the parking valet, the red carpet was already rolled out under the marquee for us, and it took us no more than fifteen minutes to shower and get to the dining room for our second real meal of the day. Travel gives Joy Sue a substantial appetite. For food, too.

"Now tell me," I said over old brandy in a balloon glass and coffee with a twist in a demitasse of fine French porcelain, "why you decided on this of all places. I don't see anyone here but us that hasn't already been embalmed." That was a slight exaggeration, not a big one.

"Well, considerations of economy, for one thing. It was on special, just twelve hundred dollars a head for a full week, with Continental brakefuss thrown in. Tips not included, o' course. Then I thought, the kind o' people hangs out here, you might git a sorta business inspiration from 'em."

I tried digesting that, along with the mesquite-barbecued prime rib I'd ordered in preference to the Lite (no bacon strip) filet mignon. True, I'd seen about a dozen *Wall Street Jour-*

nals abandoned in the lobby, which was also liberally sprinkled with house copies of *Forbes*, *Fortune*, and others. Maybe she was a couple of steps ahead of me, not for the first time.

At the time, however, I didn't belabor that line of thought. If it was only tennish locally, that meant midnight civilized East Coast time, and our series of jets had me well lagged.

"We'll think about that tomorrow," I yawned at her. I signed the chit in the tray, endorsed it for gratuities, and took her upstairs.

"I hope you signed us in 'Mr. and Mrs.,'" she said as we passed the lobby. "That's how I made the reservations."

"Always," I smiled. "No matter who I'm with." She reached under my jacket and pinched me painfully. "It really confused them when I took a trip with my brother one time."

"You ain't got no brother. Ah'm sure you jess *hatched*." I couldn't tell whether she was being playful or hostile.

She was snoozing like a babe when morning rose like a young volcano out of the mountains, across our balcony and through the sliding glass wall. I was studying her frilly nightgown I'd been too tired to notice

the night before, wondering if I could take it off without waking her, when room service discreetly knocked and entered with croissants and coffee. It seemed early, but I've always thought Western ways were strange.

There was a copy of the local daily, the *Cactus Valley Courier*, on the tray, and I nibbled it along with what I cost accounted to be a forty dollar croissant and a cup of coffee that almost made me forgive them.

Reading the paper was a trip in a time machine. Some rancher's daughter had got married carrying a bouquet of yucca blossoms. The county agent's column discussed an obscure cattle disease caused by grazing in cactus patches. Someone had registered a mining claim on Muleshoe Mountain. The sparse comics were titles I'd never heard of, or ones I remembered from childhood totally changed.

I put the paper away for later perusal when I heard Joy Sue stirring. I fixed her a cup of the candylike coffee she likes to start the day with and handed her a croissant still warm from under its dome. She handed it back for me to smear with a thick layer of real Dundee marmalade.

"Lemme git outa this ol' hot stuffy gown first," she said. "Ah cain't eat while Ah'm swelterin'."

Gentleman that I am, I helped her off with the offending garment. She looked good without it, too, though I was sorry I'd missed all the subtleties of the night before, like its being composed almost entirely of little lacy bows holding each other together.

There's something about the way Joy Sue eats that has an effect on me. Men with impure minds will know what I mean. I admired her ill-concealed joy in sensuous pleasures as she indulged herself, envying the little suntan-colored crumbs she was scattering down her front.

"Just because we're prosperous now doesn't mean you ought to waste food," I finally had to say. "Look at all those crumbs."

"Well, you could do somethin' about 'em."

When I finished investigating, there wasn't a crumb left on her.

By the time we got around to a real breakfast, other people were beginning to think about lunch. There's a lot of energy in a croissant.

The rest of that midday we strolled around the grounds, took a dip in the springfed pool

that looked as if it had been carved from the desert rocks, then went in for a late lunch. While Joy Sue dropped into the glamor salon for a touchup she didn't need—I'd given her a C-note for a candy bar after lunch, but she squandered it on lily-gilding instead—I sat in the lobby and caught up on my reading.

The *Journal* was still bland, but an article on semiconductors in one of the monthlies intrigued me. It seemed that the coming trend in mining shares was going to be rare earth metals, the kind of elements they name after some village in Switzerland or Rumania. I decided to free-associate on that line of thought.

For the next couple of days we just unwound, though we avoided going totally flat by re-winding at night. I'd had no idea how the grueling routine of making legal money was inhibiting my creativity until I got away from it. We did a short horseback ride—the morning was enough, and we cancelled the afternoon reservations—swam, ate, and whatever else you do to keep from being bored to death at a resort. I got acquainted with a couple of securities types and read some booklets on minerals and geology from the gift shop.

Then another piece fell into place, and the amorphous gel of my latest scheme began crystallizing in the barren desert rock like a latter-day geode. The next morning the local paper carried a small item informing me, and the other three hundred people in Cactus County, that a find of "Germanium and related minerals" had been made in the area, according to an unnamed source.

This got me rolling. I went to the gift shop and located sandals, a straw sombrero named "Hecho en Mexico," a pair of rather gross sunglasses, and a really remarkable shirt that looked Hawaiian but had cactuses instead of palm trees and hibiscus on it. All for less than I'd have paid for a single Brooks Brothers suit back home. I was glad I'd brought my own shorts.

I paid in plastic, not having brought our securities portfolio, and went back to the room. Joy Sue was still finishing her beauty sleep, a custom I've respected for excellent and proven reasons. I donned my new habit and was preening in the full-length mirror, wondering if my powder-blue ascot would lend a nice touch to the orange and green shirt, when in the mirror I saw her wake with a languid stretch that distracted me from my narcissism.

She'd decided earlier that the desert nights were too hot for her diaphanous nightwear, even though it took some fiddling with the air conditioner control.

Ceasing my self-admiration, I switched my view to her. First she opened her eyes a little, then all the way at once, like a comedian doing a double-take.

"Billy John! You ain't a-goin' out *lookin'* like that?" Her pure native Appalachian tongue—I'd startled her into a total regression.

"Business calls, m'dear."

She squinted a half frown at me. "You wootn look like that on purpose, less'n you had a *purpose*."

I stepped over to the bed, bent, and kissed her. "I could be diverted to another purpose."

"Ah cootn now. Ah'm laughin' too hard. Han' me a cross ant, with lots o' gooey stuff on it."

Skillfully I smeared her a croissant—it looked like purple raspberry preserves this morning, unless it was a very strange caviar—and sugared her coffee till the spoon would just barely stand up in it. She was tapering off.

"Oh darn," she said. "Ah got this sticky stuff all down ma front."

"Not to worry, dearheart. I'll take care of it. . . . mmm, delicious."

"Billy John. You got biznis to tend to today."

"Mañana. There's lots of time out here in the desert."

She slapped my face, not hard enough to cause serious injury. "Work first, play later. We got three days left in this here moslem."

"Hunh?"

"I said, we coulda got a nice cemetery lot for what this place is costin' us, an' I don't feel like renewin' the lease here."

"Oh." I frowned in thought. "Well, if you're trying to say you're getting bored, you could drive into Cactus Junction with me. Though most of the work I have to do is sort of lone wolf stuff."

She sniffed. "Don't overexcite me. Watchin' the stagecoach come in might be more'n ma heart could hannel." With an unreadably subtle expression she added, "B'sides, Ah got two dates today."

"?"

"One of 'em's younger'n you but not as rich, an' th'other'n's richer but not as young." Before I could come up with a response to that, she got up and dug in a drawer. I like to watch Joy Sue digging in a drawer, particularly a bottom drawer. She came up with the ascot,

wrapped it around me, and tucked it in. "There. Case anybody fails to mistake you for a tourist. Not that your legs ain't white enough."

"Rmph. Some people tan faster than others." I looked her over where she was turning an enviable honey color outside a diminutive bikini area. Before I left, I gave her a hug that left her breathless, then she took a kiss that left me breathless.

"Yo're still in the runnin', W.J.," she told me as I stepped out the door.

On the way to town I struggled to keep business matters in mind. She had a way of keeping me just jealous enough to turn me on and not enough to turn me off. I at least halfway enjoyed the piquancy of it for twenty-five miles.

At the county seat, though, I flipped into my business mode. I still didn't have a firm plan in mind, I was just bird-dogging because I smelled a pheasant in the bush.

My first stop was the public library where I spent most of the morning. I learned more about semiconductors, rare earths, mineralogy, and geology than I had ever cared to know till a few hours earlier. I took notes and Xeroxed some stuff, then went by the town's

one bookstore and got their last copy of a local title on the same subject.

"Ordinarily we don't sell three of these a year," the proprietress, a blue-tinted widow from Pennsylvania, told me. "But we've had a rush on them for some reason. This makes four copies in two days." I picked up a couple of other titles, paid her, and we parted on good terms.

By then it was lunchtime, and I hadn't had anything to eat but my morning's croissant. I found a good local place—identifiable by a comfortable-looking mix of pickup trucks and dusty this-year's Cadillacs—and went in to welcome air-conditioned comfort. While I was waiting for my Mexican combination plate, I drank an ice cold real Mexican beer out of a real glass bottle, clear and crisp and bitter and clean, no sour rice flavor to it. A second one would have tasted good and been a mistake, so I had iced tea with lunch. It was a very tasty lunch, and I didn't put additional hot sauce on anything.

When I got to the courthouse, I thought they were following the siesta custom but finally located a couple of available civil servants. For a reasonable outlay I departed with a load of large-scale maps, Xeroxes of recent property and mineral-

rights transfers, and various other useful information.

Just as well that I didn't mind—maybe preferred, I wasn't sure yet—high visibility. In a town of eight thousand souls, fifty miles from the next Last Chance Gas Station in any direction, I was no more conspicuous in my tourist getup than I would have been any other way. Maybe less so than in my normal Eastern garb.

My last stop of the day was the local rock shop. Not a tapes-and-amplifiers place, but one with crystals and cabochons in the windows.

Sam's Stone Shop was an interesting environment for an anthropologist, which is a sort of necessary sideline for the truly professional securities scammer. It was an interface place where the worlds of tourist and local meshed for a moment before going their separate ways.

There were a couple of other tourists, browsing, more outrageous-looking than myself at a glance. A couple of locals were sitting on stools at the counter, yarning with Sam. He had to be Sam. He was pale-faced by Cactus Junction standards, too fat for his health, and had an affable smile with a lightning-calculating cash register mind behind it. I felt an immediate kinship with him.

I figured Sam for someone who'd come out from the East seventeen years before on vague grounds of health—he still had a tinge of Jersey or Long Island to his speech—found an undemanding niche he was comfortable in, and enjoyed the new laid-back lifestyle. I was wrong only in details, like fourteen years and Connecticut instead.

I browsed, eavesdropped, started a little pile of stuff on the counter: an amethyst crystal for an imaginary maiden aunt who was into New Age metaphysics, a couple of cards with pasted-on minerals and semiprecious stones for an equally imaginary nephew, more booklets on minerals, rockhounding, and local lore. While I was at it, I picked up a polished slice of geode with bands of agate the same shade of blue as the eyes of my very real junior partner.

Getting into the bull session was no problem. My presence was established as harmless; and Sam smelled a few more dollars in my pocket than I was yet committed for, so they gave me some elbow space at the counter.

The locals were a boy about high school age, obviously a hobby rockhound, and a grizzled, leather-skinned oldtimer who I guessed picked up cash

enough bringing in thunder eggs and stuff to cover beans and jerky, or whatever he ate, while looking for the big strike at the end of the rainbow. I said a few dumb things and listened a lot.

Finally I asked, "What about this big uranium strike I heard about? Over in the, I forget the name of them, mountains?"

Their ears perked up, but they were puzzled. "I ain't heard nothin' about that," said the oldtimer.

"Well, maybe it was tungsten. I may not have heard it right."

"Somebody found some Schmitzerite over around the Muleshoes a little while back," Sam put in.

"What's Schmitzerite?"

He scuffled around on a shelf and handed me a drab-looking piece of rock. "Rare earth ore. Germanium and stuff."

"In a complex silico-carbonate," the boy added.

"Ah. That sounds right. Now that I recall the conversation, I think that's what he did say."

I eased out of the talk once it started rolling on that subject and kept my ears open. I acquired a carload of chaff and a few grains of ore, if you'll excuse the metaphor.

By the time I was ready to leave I'd bought a pound of semi-precious pebbles—when

you held them right and licked them to bring out the color, you could tell what they were—and declined to purchase a tumbling machine that would polish them into baroque gems, which was what Sam called pebbles that didn't need to be licked to bring out the color. I also bought a few pieces of Schmitzerite.

As I was leaving, the old guy stopped me. "I'm Cactus Valley Scotty," he said. "I'm a guide in my spare time. If you wanna go rockhoundin' or prospectin', just ask ol' Sam here, he'll find me." He picked one of Sam's cards off the counter, scribbled his name on it, and handed it to me.

I wished them all a good afternoon and left, feeling somewhat rocky if not quite stoned.

I didn't see Joy Sue around the lobby or pool areas as I came in on a zigzag course, so I went on up to the room. When I unlocked and walked in, she was in front of the balconyside glass wall, silhouetted against the blazing desert sunlight in something delicious and diaphanous. Sometimes I think she uses little tricks like that to manipulate me. It works.

"What if I'd been the bellhop or something?" I asked with a touch of pique.

"Well, you'd'a prob'ly knocked p'litley first, and I'd'a said, 'Come on in, darlin', we hafta hurry 'fore my husban' gits back.'" It was her lazy languid lush Appalachian this time.

"Shameless tart." I relented enough to give her a reasonably good hug and kiss. "Well, excluding the bellhops, how did your other two dates go?"

She did immoral things to my left earlobe with lustful, shameless fingertips. "Well, frankly, not so good. My *rich* date, that was gonna teach me chess, he had to break the date 'cause he had a attack o' gout. Or maybe Alzheimer's, he cootn remember which."

"Ah."

"An' the young one, he jess played too rough, you wootn *b'lieve* some of the bruises he left on me." She flicked her kimono open and pointed out a couple of places that might have been bruised. I refused to take the bait. She finally went on: "But you oughtta seen some o' the other rich fat ol' ladies in the sand-skiin' class."

"You're not that fat. Only in places."

"Help me outa this hot garment and you c'n show me where. Maybe massage ma bruises or sump'n while you're at it."

*

Later we were lying there entwined, soft desert air wafting across us. A time for whispering sweet nothings.

While I tried to think of a nothing sweet enough for the occasion, Joy Sue beat me to it. "All Ah could thaink about the las' ten minutes, you got tacos on yore breath." So much for the intrinsic romanticism of the human female.

"Unh-uh. One chile relleno, red rice and brown beans, small enchilada. Guacamole with little sharkfin tostadas and a tiny piece of flan."

She pinched me painfully. "Ah'm not sure what all them are, but you been out eatin' *luxurious* whilst Ah was trapped here with all this haughty cuisine. You know what Ah had for lunch today? Some kinda fish even the *waiter* cootn per-nounce, an' when it showed up, it was all purply-blue, like they'd had to beat it to death." She took a long deep breath. "Do you s'pose all these ol' folks got trapped here when they's our age?"

I recognized the symptoms. Resort claustrophobia. And her dialect was getting almost too thick to understand. She needed time off from luxury, ease, and recreation. Urgently.

Idly tracing a heart shape around her navel with a fingertip, I said, "How would you

like to go rockhounding with an oldtimey Western prospector tomorrow?"

"We have to leave here to do it?"

"Up at Cactus Junction. Twenty-five miles or so."

"Let's go. Sure we cain't do it tonight?"

"Can't see the rocks in the dark. Besides, there's deadly scorpions in the desert at night."

"Make it mornin', then. And now that you 'minded me, what's in them sacks you brought?"

Joy Sue was up early—I'd been rising with the sun, same time as I would back East but two hours earlier, if you get me—so we skipped the croissant ritual, crumb patrol and all, and went down for an early field hand's, or ranch hand's, breakfast. Most of the antique millionaires weren't up and about yet.

It took a while to convince Joy Sue that sandals and shorts weren't appropriate, but even in sneakers and jeans she looked sexier than your average rockhound. I called Sam's shop before we left and gave him a message for Cactus Valley Scotty.

It was tennish by the time we rendezvoused at the rock shop, and the sun was already notice-

able. Joy Sue had to take a quick tour of the shop, finding a lot of pretty colored rocks I should have bought her one of. I steered her back toward the expedition.

What I expected was an old high-wheel truck with a waterbag hanging off the door handle, but we went in a jeep. It looked as if it had been mothballed in '45 and then put back into service for the Korean war, but it ran. I shared the back with two coolers and a bunch of junk; Joy Sue, whose padding better equipped her for the rumble seat, sat up front and dangerously distracted Scotty.

A few miles out of town he turned off the paved road and started up a rutted track toward a line of blue hills that turned brown as we approached. Something to do with the desert air.

He would stop occasionally for us to pick up pebbles like the ones I'd paid nine ninety-five a pound for in the shop. At that rate, we made out like bandits that day. Joy Sue was fascinated, and I did some rapid calculating myself. Maybe, one way or another, there *was* some gold in these thar hills. Then I realized I was thinking of a legitimate operation and started a course correction.

There was a kind of desolate tranquillity out there, when we

started wandering among the boulders and yuccas on the mesa land, that I could understand people getting hooked on. I fought it off and tried to keep my mind on business.

I picked Scotty's brain now and then about the business aspects of mining and learned some things. You don't take your bag of nuggets to the Federal Assay Office like in the black and white Westerns: you take it to the commercial lab on Merienda Street. There are still some places where you can stake a claim on government land, but mostly it's privately owned now. If you find a sapphire mine or something, you buy the ranch it's on to get it. Presumably pretending you want to raise goats or build a dude ranch, to keep the price reasonable. You can also lease mineral rights, but that's too straightforward for me.

Another little piece or two fell into place, though I didn't really know what I was doing.

Also I apparently wasn't subtle enough because at lunch break Scotty asked me after one of my naive, innocent questions: "You plannin' on goin' into prospectin'?"

I shook my head, trying to look superficially supercilious without sacrificing my pose of innocence. "I'm afraid not. I do all my prospecting with a pro-

spectus." He looked puzzled, which wasn't surprising. "I deal in securities back East. Stocks and bonds. I was just curious about the business aspects of mining. I think it might be profitable for me to put more emphasis on mining shares."

That triggered him off. He stopped walking, and we stood where we were. He got a wistful look on his face. "What a man could do," he began in the enraptured ritual chant of the born dreamer, "he could buy this here mountain, he'd have all the gem rocks you could carry out in trucks in a lifetime or more." He took a deep breath to get rolling, and I figured I was in for a good listen.

He pointed to the face of the mountain. "See that gap up there, the big un with all the canyons runnin' into it?" I nodded. "Well, you 'member them blue an' green aggrits we picked up in the arroyo back yonder?"

We'd picked up hundreds of rocks of dozens of kinds from more arroyos than I had cared to count, but I remembered that incident because one of the agates had been that particular Joy Sue eye color. I nodded again.

"Well, they come from somewhere up there. Them canyons, they lead into that gap. An' that gap, it goes straight

inta that 'royo. Ain't nowheres else they coulda come from."

I did some quick cost accounting in my head. "Well, they looked like nice agates, but could you get enough to pay for a mountain?"

He pulled a plug of Brown Mule out of one of his many pockets, started to bite off a chew, then decided he'd rather talk. "Agates ain't all. I found dozens o' thunder eggs, they bring me five or six bucks apiece." I figured Sam, after working them over, was reselling them for a couple of hundred each all told. "Some gold, mostly black sand you could pan if you had the water. A few little nuggets. But—"

He glanced around conspiratorially, looking for walls that might have ears and eyes in them. I thought I saw a con coming on, so I alerted all alarm systems.

He reached into his pocket with a motion that struck me as reverent. "I ain't never showed this to nobody before," he whispered. He brought his hand out of the pocket, opened it, and there lying in his calloused palm was what looked like a big pebble of maybe limestone or flint.

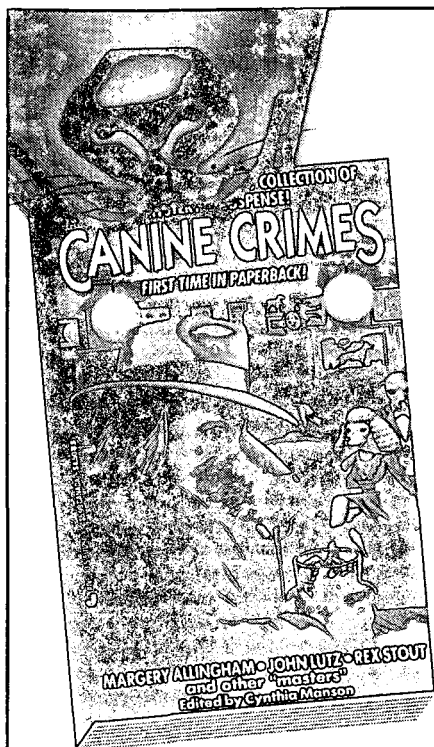
Then he turned it over, licked it in approved fashion, and held it up to me.

I don't know everything there is to know about opals, but I knew that was what I was looking at. This one was a glob about the size of an almond, shell and all, nestled into the rough rock pebble. The ground color was a hazy blue, like a sky with high, misty, ice-particle clouds. Floating in the sky were stars, comets, galaxies of fire. Mostly in greens and blues, but there were specks and streaks and ripples of orange and red, too.

With a trembling forefinger I rewet the stone—I don't do secondhand lickin's after nobody—and took a close look. No way was this anything but what it seemed. It had about twice the pizzazz of a precious Australian opal I'd once seen. The best of those had been nudging upward into the price-per-carat range of diamonds at the time, and no big reason to suppose the bottom had dropped out of the market.

"I don't know what these are going for now," I began, "but I'd like to hear your price."

He gently but firmly retrieved the stone, which I'd been holding, my fingers between his. "Mister, only way you'd git this from me is bein' faster on the draw." He said it flat and deadpan, like an elementary school pupil reciting state capitals. Strictly factual.



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We'd both forgot our six-guns that morning, but I got his meaning.

We were at a sort of impasse. I fell back on my technique of letting him have the next word, though it wasn't easy smiling quietly while I wondered with consuming curiosity where he was getting to.

"There's more o' these up there," he said at last. "I've found some little'uns like this, I'll let you have one if you won't tell nobody where it come from. 'Specially Sam. I picked up a lot o' other opals come down from there, not blue like this'n. Git up a little closer, I can pick some outa the sand for you. But the nest they hatch from, it's up in the hills." He gestured a wide-armed, Western sort of gesture.

"I'd sort of like to see more of the place you're talking about. How close can we get?" I moved over to a better vantage point to look past a boulder.

"Just up to the fence."

"I've seen you go through a couple of fences."

"I go th'ough a bob-wire fence, that's to keep cattle *in*. Chain link, that's to keep folks *out*."

I looked across into the distance and saw the silver-grey line snaking across the countryside at the bottom of the foothills. Miles of chain link

fence, at a couple of bucks, I estimated, per foot. "Hm. Maybe they know what they've got."

He shook his head. "Nope. If they knowed what I know they's there, they'd have armed patrols an' a minin' operation goin' on. They're just *settin'* on it." He spat onto the sand. "Bunch o' dad-blamed Easterners—meanin' no offense, I'm shore—come out in their suits an' ties with their chests stuck out, strutted roun' for a while, an' went back East. Never done nothin' more, just had that big fence built to keep honest folks offa land they ain't usin'."

I sensed a difference between Eastern and Western attitudes. I wasn't sure I didn't sympathize with Scotty's point of view. "Well, if they didn't want to mine here . . . I mean, it looks pretty dry for cattle."

He spat again, a dry cottony spit this time. "Well, maybe on them three sections you could run twenty or thirty head o' longhorn, or maybe a hunderd goats. Nope, they's gonna build a ree-sort, a kinda dude ranch an' ho-tel combination." I noticed his accent, like Joy Sue's, got thicker as he got more perturbed.

"Did they run into problems, or just change their minds?"

He grinned. "Problems, I reck'n. Last I heard, they's tryin' to figger which'd cost

more, ten tank trucks o' water a day, or a twenty mile pipeline an' pumpin' station. An' bribin' the right folks in the city water plant to buy the water in the fuss place, since they already ain't 'nough to go round." He looked like he knew something he wasn't telling. I didn't press him.

After a minute he chuckled. "They's plannin' to use the water that comes down from that little spraing up there. State man, when he checked it out, like to blowed his top. Full o' copper an' fluoride an' other junk. Said anybody drunk that, they'd be their own lightnin' rod. Hell, I coulda told 'm that. Back when I usta prospect up there, 'fore they built the dad-gum fence, I didn't need to taste it, I could *smell* the copper in it." I believed him.

"So now they're selling it, or just hanging on hoping it'll appreciate?" I didn't like the line of thought I kept getting back on.

"Oh, they'd sell. I even writ an' ast 'em 'bout it. Hundred thousand dollars. That's perty high for juss three sections, cain't git a buyer at that price. Worth it to *me*, 'cause I know what's *there*, but hell, I'll never see *ten* thousan' all in one piece, and they ain't innersted in sellin' dollar down, dollar a week."

He got a disgusted look on his face and kicked a rock with his dusty, cracked boot. Then he did a doubletake, bent over and picked up the rock, blew the sand off, and licked it.

"Wile be damned," he muttered. He pulled the rock hammer out of his belt, placed the rock on a handy nearby boulder, and clobbered the bejabbers out of it. At last it grudgingly split along the little flaw he'd been attacking.

He put on an ear-piercing grin that showed all twelve of his teeth and handed one of the halves to me. "It's a *sign*," he pronounced, with complete belief in his own authority.

The inside of the rock was a translucent mottled green, smooth as wet soap. The kind of texture you want to rub because it feels good. I tried it on my thumb and my cheek and looked again. It was just waiting for some Oriental craftsman to carve pretty little fishes and sexy eardrops from it. Reluctantly I handed it to Scotty; he waved it back into my rock sack, which was getting heavy, and put the other half into his own.

A kind of willing silence prevailed as he drove us on to the terminus of the trip. Joy Sue tried to prattle a little about all the pretty pebbles she'd found, but Scotty and I were so deep

in our own thoughts she finally gave a petulant little snort—she has the sexiest petulant snort of any girl I know—and sat back to watch the scenery as we bounced past it.

He drove us on up to where the big arroyo ran under the chain link fence, by way of a trace he'd probably worn there himself over the years. He found a couple of small decent opals, as he'd said he would; he went to a little limestone lip where the wash ran over, dug through the sand under it with his all-purpose rock hammer, and set us to work digging through the gravel he uncovered. It was nearly all the nine dollars and ninety-five cents a pound stuff, and by now even Joy Sue was only saving the best. I thought I'd found an opal myself, but it was only a piece of flint with embedded quartz crystals. The two little ones he found he handed to Joy Sue. I was sure he could have got a few dollars for them from Sam.

By quitting time I was ready to get back to El Desierto Spa & Racquet Club, our home away from home, for a tepid bath and to put my feet up, but Scotty had some scenery to show us—which was worth it, especially with the low sun spreading an ineffable sad clean solitude over the barren wilderness and making opals of the

sparse shreds of wispy cloud overhead. Set in turquoise, at that.

Then Joy Sue decided that the three of us ought to go out for a Mexican dinner before Scotty took us back to the car. He was bashful about going into as posh a place as La Posta—I'd have hated to subject him to the dining room at El Desierto—but he didn't look any scruffier than we did, just more authentic. Joy Sue talked him into it, one of her many skills. They let us in but granted with alacrity our request for a secluded table.

Joy Sue pigged out. Scotty, more circumspect, steered past the lettuce and guacamole but made up for it by putting extra hot sauce on everything, and even the fierce *salsa verde* on a couple of items. We were all pretty mellow by the time the meal was over. I was already laded past the plimsoll, but offered Scotty a beer and he accepted.

I banked a lot of data as we sipped coffee and he went on to a second beer. The mountain he wanted to buy was Little Muleshoe, just south of Big Muleshoe, putative home of the germanium strike. It was about twenty-nine hundred feet above sea level and nine hundred above the valley floor—I'd thought the whole desert pla-

teau was higher than that, but I checked his figures later.

The Muleshoe chain, from Burro Pass to Eagle Gap, included Big and Little Muleshoe and various less important peaks. The three sections owned by the Easterners included all of Little Muleshoe from Saddle Pass on the north to Broken Hills on the south, and some mesa land on both sides. I wouldn't have believed you could fit that much mountain into three square miles. Actually, it couldn't have been done without a lot of folding.

I was rapt—or wrapped, I wasn't sure which—in thought on the way back to the car, while Joy Sue and Scotty chatted merrily. Though they were from thousands of miles apart, they seemed to have no trouble understanding each other. In my twilight years I plan, instead of beekeeping or growing vegetable marrows, to write a long monograph on the possibility that Appalachian and Arizonian are cognate languages, perhaps distantly related to English.

Scotty detoured by his shack on the way, went in, and brought out a handful of rocks. He gave them to Joy Sue, and while she was admiring them he slipped a little one into my palm. I squeezed my hand

around it and put it in my shirt pocket.

On the way home, Joy Sue poked me in the ribs, causing me to swerve and scare the day-lights out of a roadside cactus.

"You 'wake?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Thought you might be hypnotized or somethin'."

"Nope. Just trying to think."

"Well, if you secede at it, lemme know."

We drove on a few miles. She started to say something, decided not to. She has a way of moving one hand just before she speaks at times like that. I continued ruminating about Scotty's motivation. He was trying to sell me that mountain: was he in the pay of the syndicate that owned it, "Sell this albatross for us and you get ten percent?" It didn't seem to fit his character. Did he have a Byzantine scheme in mind for me to provide a cover for some clandestine or marginal activity on his part? I didn't really see him getting that complex—I had him sized up as the kind of character who'd tell close to the truth about what he was after and offer a fair split for help received.

I also couldn't figure the rock-planting trick. At least parts of that didn't make sense. You don't just kick a rock and

discover it's a two pound chunk of jadeite—but when I reconstructed my own movements, he hadn't led me to it, I'd led him to it.

This left wide open the hard to swallow possibility that he was playing it straight. In my line of business, that's a dangerous assumption.

The blue fire opals I didn't know enough about to make a guess. I could intelligently estimate whether a specimen might be an orange Querétaro fire opal, an Australian black, an Austrian milk opal—I briefly considered a career as a jewel thief in my innocent youth—but this was way beyond those. If a jeweler had shown me the stone, I'd have guessed Australia, simply because the finest and weirdest come from there. I didn't have any idea what it would appraise at, but I would have been surprised if Scotty had ever had enough in his jeans at one time to buy it off the shelf.

Joy Sue paraded back and forth in front of me about four times, ostensibly getting ready for bed, while I sat in the easy chair thinking. She finally stopped in front of me, put her little fists on her hips, and demanded:

"Ain't you gonna say somethin' 'bout my purple garter belt Ah'm wearin' juss for you?"

She wasn't, of course, wearing a purple garter belt. Not even so much as a jewel in her navel.

"Sorry. I'm thinking serious business thoughts."

"Muss be good uns, t'compete with me."

I smiled wanly and patted the arm of the chair. She resisted the implicit invitation. "I'm trying to figure Scotty's angle. Why does he want that mountain?"

She looked at me as an analyst might look at an interesting new patient. "'Cause it's got rocks on it, why else?" Then she added, "Wootn mind havin' one m'self. These ain't as *green* as where I grewed up, but they got a clearer view."

"You don't think he has an angle?"

She pushed her lower lip out in a manner I experienced as more sexy than pensive. "Mmm, yeah. He thinks there's sumpn more up there than's been found." It was only then that I remembered the little piece of blue opal in my pocket. I dug it out, rubbed it on my shirt, and handed it to her. She looked, licked, looked again. "Ah *like* it. Valu'ble?"

"I think so. I'll have it looked at when we get back. I'm not even sure it came from there, but he said it did."

"Well, he wootn want us to buy him the wrong mountain, would he? You been round too many people that thaink crooked." She uncrossed my knees and sat sort of sidesaddle on my lap, one knee in my navel and an elbow on the chair arm. It's awfully hard to tell her deliberate behavior from her natural sensuosity. In that particular case she might have been manipulating me.

Fiddling with my shirt buttons, she asked me questions about price and such. By the time I finished answering her, she was playing with the modest sprinkling of hairs on my chest. "Whyn't we jess go 'head an' buy it, figger out what to do with it later? Git a bunch o' ingredients, then decide what to cook."

"Well, I really wanted to do something *crooked*. At least dishonest, hopefully illegal as well."

"That ain't ruled out. I might could even he'p you come up with somethin'." She frowned a pensive frown. "Matter o' fact, if you're not interested, I might just buy it myself."

By the time the powwow was over, I got the feeling that she'd won and I'd lost and that was the way I'd actually wanted it to turn out. Then we turned off business and tuned in to recreation.

Next morning, having forgotten what a competent exec. sec Joy Sue had been before her promotion to junior partner, I was getting ready to go into town for more paperwork when she preempted the role.

"It's yore turn t'stay here an' amuse the mummy collection," she announced. "Le's make a list of errands we need run while you collect a few prospects."

We made the list, things like getting details on Little Muleshoe at the courthouse, going by Scotty's for a direct—not through Sam—mailing address, buying an airmail subscription to the *Cactus Valley Courier*. Not without misgivings I handed her the keys to the car. Her driving style is not flagrantly hazardous, but it has an original panache that can dismay.

After breakfast we got Joy Sue off to the big city, and I dug through my card file. That is, my file of business cards for various purposes. I finally settled on Tarnham & Co., Private Issue Securities. Phineas B. Tarnham was president of the firm, though the card didn't say so. The card gave a P.O. box—not in Wilmington—and a reasonably untraceable relayed WATS number.

The lounge—neither a bar nor a restroom, but a secluded corner of the lobby—was morning headquarters for the retired capitalists' brigade. I felt a moment's twinge of conscience as I looked at the old faces around me, thinking of the stories about old folks languishing in poverty because some con man ripped them off, but what I saw here was a lot of idle capital and no hardship cases.

I got into a dozen conversations over the morning, not without courting death by slow boredom, and by lunchtime had settled on three likely prospects, obviously prosperous and enough this side of the grave to be still active.

J. Millard Whittle had probably been stiff and uptight before he turned rigid with age. He dressed in pinstripes for breakfast and resented the presence of the Indians and Mexicans on the premises, though somebody had to do the floor shows and dirty work. He thought Custer was soft on minorities.

Andrew M. Kirkendyke was only late middle-aged and wore a little *M* button on his lapel, meaning he belonged to Mensa. Those people are highly intelligent, but only one in three will come in out of the rain without being prompted. His presence

on the prospect list did remind me to watch my logic and grammar when I made my pitch.

George W. Sleeve was the one I thought might be most productive. The others were buyer types, he was a seller type. Younger than the other two, he was pale-faced with receding dark hair, chubby-cheeked, with an unctuous gloss to his little porcine face. He reminded me of a suckling pig medium rare, though his eyes were better. I had him figured for at least as crooked as I was, a lot less ethical, and too cagey to do something outright illegal. I estimated three percent would buy a lot of middlemanning from him.

They all got the same story from me: a client of my firm—i.e. of Tarnham & Co.—was interested in covertly building up a fancy minerals empire, including rare earths, precious metals, and what have you. They were acquiring local properties in the neighborhood of the germanium strike and were ready to take over an existing low-profile, local operation. I ad-libbed such improvisations as I went along, and showed them clippings and some stuff from public records. And then a little piece of Schmitzerite I'd bought from Sam.

George Sleeve elected to treat me to lunch, and my hunch was confirmed; out of earshot of the conservative brigade, he was as full of angles as a geometry book, none of them exactly ninety degrees. It was a good lunch. I was sorry there was no *truite bleu* that day. We parted with a dampish, greasyish handshake, dreams of avarice dancing in both our heads.

Joy Sue returned with tacos, or something similar, on her breath and shopping bags in hand. Women of every age, color, denomination, and national origin can find shopping wherever they go. She also had achieved the simple goals assigned.

While she was modeling some of her loot for me—I'd never seen anyone look sinfully voluptuous in a Mexican peasant dress before—she said, "Ah gave ol' Scotty a goodbye hug."

"How did he handle it?"

"Kinda shook. Ah don't think he's been gettin' too much huggin's lately." Before I could comment she added: "He kinda reminds me of my gran'daddy."

I was a little surprised, and said so. "I wouldn't have expected your grandfather to be at all like him."

"Well, he *ain't*. He jes' sets round drainkin' moonshine an'

spittin' t'bacca juice on the floor—or mostly down his chin—an' they hafta chase him down ever' spraing ta change his underwear. That's why he 'minded me of him."

"Oh. You mean like when, the farther away from home you got, the less homesick you were?" I was beginning to understand Joy Sue's logic, which discovery rather frightened me.

"Yeah." She continued modeling, and one thing led to another, and we dined late.

Our last full day at El Desierto, we threw ourselves into the gay social whirl. Joy Sue beat me all holler at shuffleboard and went on to win the day's tournament. We successfully evaded a bridge invitation, she sweetly flirted with two tycoons and a young staff member; whether for the innocent pleasure of leaving a trail of broken hearts behind her or as a subtle message to me, I wasn't sure. She seems to have this deep inner insecurity that requires constant reassurance. Or maybe she just does it for fun.

We juggled reservations, drove to Tucson and did a little business there, including a couple of rock shop stops, and got a direct flight back to Wilmington.

Back home, things got businesslike. For one thing, we had about two weeks' backlog of routine work to make up for being away a week—I've never figured how that happens. Then it took another couple of weeks to acquire Little Muleshoe for eighty-five grand, and another couple of days to figure why I was so surprised and gratified at the quick, easy, and valuable acquisition. What I finally figured out was that I'd actually *wanted* the mountain, and this scared me.

Since we had no intention of making money out of Little Muleshoe—just getting a few opals and making Scotty happy—a closely held corporation made better sense than a limited partnership, so we created Little Muleshoe Prospecting Co., Inc., with equal shares and the three of us as officers, as a normal and legal Delaware corporation. Then I traded the mountain to the corporation for par 10¢ shares at a personal loss, saving myself a nice tax bite.

That out of the way, I started the machinery rolling for my Great Mineral Scam. We invented Arizona Resources Corp. and Mineral Acquisition Associates, Inc. For a sizable consideration MAA transferred its 13/16ths mineral rights on a tract on Big Muleshoe to

ARC. All this we duly documented, though in a way that didn't burden official records-keeping facilities.

I estimated the odds of running into one of our victims on the streets of Cactus Junction or up on Little Muleshoe, in case we made a trip or two a year to visit Scotty and collect our share of the opals. The chance seemed somewhere between minuscule and infinitesimal. Even if they checked the register at El Desierto, it was a long way between P. B. Tarnham of Houston and W. J. Brown of New York. Not to mention that I really meant Wilmington instead of New York.

The ARC shares were a work of American folk art. The four color pictorial part was a montage of antique public-domain artwork that showed a miner with pick and mule, sun and cactus, and what could have been a resort, a planned Navajo community, or a turn of the century bus barn. The central motif was a semicircle with rays under it: a rainbow arc? a hooded arc light? some arcane Hopi symbol? The big print was in a Victorian typeface like a Wanted poster, the text was good reliable Baskerville. All in all, it looked like something from which, if you'd invested in

it in 1898, your heirs would be sitting pretty.

I had them printed out of town under an assumed name and paid cash. It isn't illegal to have shares printed for a non-existent corporation, but they might later look like evidence of intent to defraud, and I preferred them untraceable.

As soon as I realized that we actually owned Little Muleshoe, a different matter from merely seeing the papers, we sent Scotty a key to the gate, a small expense check—Joy Sue didn't think he could handle a big one—more credentials than he needed, and a covering letter instructing him to go out and prospect.

This reminded me to take the blue opal he'd given me to a gemologist. He was impressed. It was real, it was good, it was not particularly semiprecious. He wanted to buy it, and offered a price that frightened me. I didn't mind Scotty playing around with world-class opals and getting my hands on a few to adorn Joy Sue, but it was totally contrary to my aims and goals to have a really valuable operation going.

"This is the only one I've been able to obtain," I told him smoothly. "I'm negotiating for better access to the supply, but I can't guarantee that there's

more than three like this on the planet."

I left it to him to broker the cutting and polishing of it. He thought a baroque cabochon was the best way to go, so as not to waste any of it, and I told him to go ahead.

I was getting a migraine thinking about what kind of tzimmes, bouillabaisse, or other exotic dish to cook from ingredients on hand, and had manipulated Joy Sue for a change into giving me a head-and-neck massage, when the mail came that Tuesday.

After a holiday weekend it was a mixture of junk mail, checks and bills, five-day-old first class, and the latest—from a fortnight back—*Cactus Valley Courier*. I think they fly them to the East Coast via Hong Kong.

The lead story was an upcoming parade and barbecue, now long past. The second lead, jumped to page two, was that a proposed mining operation on Big Muleshoe Mountain had been stopped by three different government agencies on the grounds that it would contaminate, inter alia, the aquifer used by the Cactus Junction municipal water plant with heavy metals, fluorides, and other stuff the reporter couldn't spell well enough for me to pro-

nounce. I couldn't quite follow the details in the *Courier*, but apparently the processing of the Schmitzerite would require diversion of a spring in the mountains for water needed in the operation, and the effluent would be full of the bad stuff. Five out of five geologists and mining engineers were agreed on it, and that seemed pretty convincing.

Things began moving about then.

At first it looked like my scam was scuttled, but then my brain came up with some vague but really crooked ideas, which I had to explain to Joy Sue so she could hold things together at the office while I earned enough frequent flyer bonuses for us to go to Bermuda or the North Woods. (Any place where Spanish wasn't spoken would have done—between Latin America and the Southwest, I was developing an accent.)

My idea was so complex, elaborate, and devious that I wasn't sure she could grasp it. I didn't grasp it myself, in fact. But after she explained it to me it became clearer. Then we simplified it. I hated to see my elegant wheels-within-wheels sacrificed, but the streamlined plan was better.

It took three trips out west, one to New York and one the long way round through Mex-

ico, before I had the groundwork laid. As it turned out, a new possibility opened up, and I hadn't even needed to go to Mexico, let alone spend all that bribe money, but at least we had a backup plan and my Spanish didn't get rusty.

As soon as I was back, we started pasting together a paperwork offensive. Vol. I, No. 1 of the *Muleshoe Mining News* was issued in one hundred copies. If they went to the right places and hit the targets, we'd never need No. 2. I sent off five copies—the other two to long-range prospects who never jelled—and hoped to trash the other ninety-five.

Working through our safe-cover P.O. box, we shipped custom packages to the three securities types I'd met at El Desierto.

George W. Sleeve received a sample share and an offer of three percent commission with a convincing cover story for the bonus.

J. Millard Whittle received Confidential/Top Secret/For Your Eyes Only evidence that we'd bribed Mexican authorities for a permit to dump toxic wastes just over the Mexican border, in an area where they would wipe out several rare and threatened subspecies of reptiles and one burrowing mammal, and either poison or

dispossess a small tribe of Indians. We had to borrow a Spanish-speaking typewriter and juggle some Xeroxes to make the letterhead from other Mexican documents I'd actually bought. It was a really nice forgery. I've thought of going into some such branch of the graphic arts as a retirement hobby.

Andrew M. (for Mensa) Kirkendyke received a lot of technical junk and a hint that the board of directors could use a high-Q stockholder as a member. If Mensa ever finds out I pulled that one, they'll retroactively cancel my long-expired membership.

They all received a nice map and copies of easement contracts giving us pipeline rights to the Mexican border. Some of them were actually bought and paid for. I needed samples of the forms in order to forge the others.

Each mailing had a little chip of Schmitzerite in it. Which could, of course, have come from anywhere, but my experience of people who deal in intangibles is that they're easily convinced by something tangible.

After due conference—actually because Joy Sue nudged me—we installed a red phone for calls forwarded via the WATS cover, and taped the

name of Tarnham & Co. on it so we wouldn't forget what we were answering. We decided it was no extravagance, since we could nicely use it for future operations.

The Great Minerals Scam went into its incubating stage, our legal business slowed down as spring fever and tax time came around, and Joy Sue started taking time off on various projects of her own. I can't say the scam totally left my mind, but I back-burnered it while getting a bit of put-off drudgery out of the way.

So when the red phone rang it half startled me. Joy Sue looked as if she had been more expecting it. Taking a quick refresher course from the label on the phone, she answered like a first-rate exec sec.

"Good morning, Tarnham & Co. . . . I believe that Mr. Tarnham is in conference right now, but if you'll give me your name . . . Oh. One moment, Mr. Whittle, let me see if I can hand him a note. I'll put you on hold for just a minute."

I gave him ninety seconds, enough to define my importance without rubbing him wrong.

"Millard! Phin Tarnham here. Sorry to keep you waiting. I didn't want to use the phone in the conference

room . . ." I stroked his ego for a minute, promised to call him back in five. Special treatment from one VIP to another. Seven minutes later my secretary called his secretary, and I started in on my pitch.

"One reason for confidentiality, Millard. The principals of Arizona Resources want to be sure that shares are in the hands of . . . investors who are in tune with their *approach* to the business at hand. You realize there's going to be a lot of flak from bleeding hearts and environmental crazies. . . . Well, there's certainly enough capital to give them the clout to deal with all of that. They've offered to resettle that little handful of Indians in a project and build a zoo or something for the wildlife. That's good PR, but of course the less spent on mollifying critics . . . No, there's only a couple million more to go. They've actually begun work on Muleshoe Mountain, very quietly—I've been looking for a way to pick up a few thousand shares myself without the SEC taking it the wrong way. . . ."

In twelve minutes and thirty-seven seconds J. Millard Whittle was the owner of twelve thousand five hundred shares of ARC at \$10. As soon as I got the money. Joy Sue typed him a lovely letter con-

firmed the purchase, and we converted his draft to cash three days later.

Slimy Sleeve surfaced meanwhile, and we had a heart-to-heart talk. I implied a lot of chicanery of the right kind to attract him without scaring him, and orders began trickling in—ten grand here, twenty grand there, and on. For each purchase I duly remitted—by UPS, not by USPS, and not from Wilmington—colorful and original works of graphic art.

There was a little burst of legal business about then, and I didn't even have time to count our ill-gotten gains for a while. Then a long letter arrived from Andrew M. Kirkendyke, wanting precise specifications on many little points.

I duly obliged, with elaborations, and over the next couple of weeks I sent him letters and faxes (not from our office machine), and we shared a couple of phone calls. Finally he said, "Well, thank you very much. I'll think about it." In a tone of voice that meant, "Don't call me, I'll call you when I'm ready. If ever."

"Maybe I *am* losing my grip," I mumbled as Joy Sue commiserated with me afterward. "I had Kirkendyke figured for a sitting duck. Snow him with data and logic, and he was programmed to take the bait."

She sat on the arm of my executive chair and gave me sweet comfort. "Mebbe you should a took th'opposite approach. He's always thainkin' facks an' figgers. Git him off balance with mistry an' glammer."

"Hmph." Maybe she was right, but the thought didn't cheer me. "Well, if you can think of a way to do that at this stage, let me know."

"Ah'll thaink about it."

We moped around till closing time, then treated ourselves to a luxury dinner for consolation. By the time we got to the Pêches Flambées à la Reine, I had almost put my failure out of mind.

“Well, if you’re jus’ gonna mope round, Ah’m takin’ some time off,” Joy Sue said a couple of days later. “We got nearly half a million totally illegal money, an’ you’re still actin’ like a chicken with the roup.”

“Sorry. It’s a self-image thing. Don’t mean to impose it on you.”

“Well, see if you c’n git over it ’fore Ah’m back.”

“Where are you going?”

“Oh, Ah dunno. Mebbe fly up th’ Big Apple an’ scam some city slickers. Mebbe out t’Ari-

zona and he’p Scotty dig opals. Let you know where Ah bin when Ah git back.”

It was alarming and depressing. We’d never been separated for more than a few hours since we met, and this reminded me how much a part of my system of needs she had become. A fit of insecurity seized me: was I destined to lose not only my touch at grifting, but my girl as well?

“Well, have a good trip.” I sounded more grudging than gracious.

She raided petty cash for five grand. That reassured me a bit. Since I’d corrupted her with big city ways, she’d learned to spend the annual per capita income of Dooleymont every twenty-four hours, so this wouldn’t last her long. Her goodbye kiss was nice, but I got to thinking later that maybe it was more compassionate than passionate. That didn’t help my ego, either.

For almost a full week I didn’t do much but make legal bucks. I even engineered a merger between two small non-descript corporations I had absentmindedly picked up controlling interest in, and figured a way to make a taxfree killing on capital gains, but this was all sort of hobby stuff.

As the days went by, I got antsier and antsier. Not a word from Joy Sue. For a while I felt abandoned, then slowly shifted round to a more vengeful attitude. When she came back, I'd . . . what if she didn't come back? I vacillated between forlorn and furious several times a day without ever coming to a resolution.

Then something happened that made me forget Joy Sue for a minute, and the next minute sent me on a guilt trip for the first philanderous feelings I'd had since meeting her, excluding momentary nostalgias for long-lost Annette.

There were two peremptory rings on the house intercom, a signal from the generic receptionist that an unannounced visitor was headed my way. That had been a valuable device more than once. Then there was a tap at the door, and in stepped an apparition.

Glossy black hair drifted like a waterfall from expensively tapered bangs. Under dramatic dark eyebrows two emerald pools threatened to drown me in their depths. A garment that had begun as a black cocktail sheath was so burdened with filmy black lace that it looked more like exorbitantly priced boudoir wear, struggling to contain and retain an abun-

dance of delicious femininity—the décolletage alone was overwhelming, not to speak of a hemline that played daring tricks with itself, revealing more than the manufacturer formerly intended of black hose dear and sheer. Later this sight caused me to wonder what Mata Hari had looked like. Right then I might have gulped—memory of the moment is still a whirlwind in my consciousness.

I stood up, gave a foolish jackass grin, and mumbled something like, "May I help you?"

"Mr. Brown?" asked a sultry, husky voice somewhere between an amplified whisper and a tone poem. I nodded dumbly. "I'd like to buy ten thousand shares of ARC."

In my flustered state I'd got paralyzed on the amenities. She seated herself, crossing her knees and displaying an expanse of silken thigh. Sensuous lips the color of ripe sweet cherries seemed to show a play of feline amusement at the corners, urbanely suppressed.

After long moments I murmured some kind of response, turned to the computer keyboard, and tried to elicit a market quote for ARC, whatever that was. It wouldn't come up under that heading, and I racked my brain for the corpo-

ration behind the abbreviation—arc lights, Arcola heaters, American Railway Cars. It didn't help that I was distracted by the aroma of expensive exotic erotic perfumery drifting across the desk.

Meanwhile I tried to tempo-rize with generic market pater: "There might not be that many shares immediately available . . . also, a purchase that size could raise the market a point or two—it might be more economical to stagger the purchases over a few days."

There was a rustle of crisp paper. "The principal on whose behalf I am acting, Mr. Kirken-dyke, gave me to understand that there would be that many shares of Arizona Resources Corp. available at the price he's prepared to pay."

It took a couple of seconds for it to seep into my brain. I turned first my head, then my chair toward her. She was holding a fat handful of crispy-crunchy brand new G-notes. My senses couldn't accept what my mind told me had to be true.

Then the lip-twitching started as I gaped open-mouthed. I had seen it before, that little dimple at the mouth corner trying to suppress laughter. Keeping my own face straight—I hate it when she one-ups me—I typed in some garbage, demanded a printout,

tore it off, and strode around the desk with it.

I held the paper out to her, leaned over, and whispered breathily in her ear, "Let's have some fun while my girlfriend's out of town."

A horrifying couple of moments followed. Green eyes widened, ripe-cherry lips parted as if to scream, then my head shook from a resounding slap to my left cheek. The possibility crossed my mind that I'd outsmarted myself.

The girl was speaking when I recovered. "So! You'd play round on me soon's ma back was turned, would you?"

Backing out of reach I responded, "Do you seriously think I'd jeopardize a handful of thousand dollar bills just to play around with some painted hussy that dropped into the office?"

She looked over the G-notes peppering the landscape. "Well, you'd'a *thought* about it. You ain't forgiven till you feed me."

"How about that cosy place in the financial district where the rich and the very rich take each other's wives?"

"Soun's fair. Ah'll d'cide whose wife to be on the way."

Late that night in the dark, I whispered to Joy Sue: "There's

one question nagging me that I haven't dared ask."

She nibbled my earlobe. "You mean whether Ah did or jus' made him thaink Ah would?"

That hadn't been the question I had in mind, but this sounded interesting. "If I asked a question like that, I couldn't be sure I was getting a straight answer."

"Well, you *might* git a straight answer. Or I might lie to you jus' to punish you for askin'."

By now she had me really wondering, though I hadn't seriously thought about it till she brought it up. Driven by curiosity, I said, "So tell me a lie."

"Well, I did and I didn't."

Chalk one more up for her. But it was nice having her back.

Fortunately the night cleaning staff were no more fastidious than you'd expect them to be. After a few days of casual search-and-retrieve we found the last of Kirkendyke's G-notes wedged in between two electronic gadgets on a desktop. It must have flown there when Joy Sue flung the handful of money up in the air before slapping me.

We figured that mopped up the Muleshoe Caper. It did, for a while.

(continued from page 4)

Maron's twenty-fifth anniversary in the mystery fiction business, her first published

story, "The Death of Me," having appeared in the January 1968 issue of AHMM.

Now, how about that!

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue

The chief of police called in his six patrolmen—officers Strong, True, Upchurch, Valiant, Wonderly, and Yeoman—to combat the crime wave that threatened peace and security in Fair City. They were instructed to look in particular for an ardent arsonist, a burly burglar, a callous car thief, a smug drug pusher, a shorter extorter, and a florid flasher. Ever alert, on the following night each officer apprehended one of the lawbreakers on a different street of the city.

- (1) The burglar, drug pusher, and flasher were Elmo, Mr. Judas, and the criminal arrested on Olympia Way (but not necessarily in that order).
- (2) Officers Strong, Valiant, and Wonderly arrested Andy, Mr. Gross, and the extorter, but not Mr. Illitch or the bad guy on Queen Avenue.
- (3) Chet, Elmo, and Fred include Mr. Kidd, the drug pusher, and the lawbreaker on Queen Avenue.
- (4) Officers True and Upchurch did not arrest Bert, Mr. Hooker, Mr. Judas, or the arsonist.
- (5) Chet, Mr. Gross, and the car thief were not nabbed by Officer Upchurch or the officers patrolling Napoleon Boulevard or Park Place.
- (6) Neither Fred nor Mr. Judas was nabbed by Officer Strong. None of the three was on Main Street or Royale Court.
- (7) Dick, Mr. Lewd, the burglar, and the drug pusher were not taken into custody by Officer True or the one on Royale Court.
- (8) Bert and Mr. Gross were not nabbed by Officer Wonderly or Officer Yeoman.
- (9) Mr. Lewd did not wage his nefarious trade on Park Place.

Who committed what crime on Queen Avenue?

See page 135 for the solution to the April puzzle.

MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

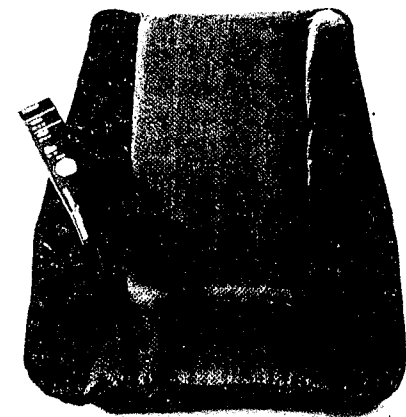
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FICTION

LICENSE TO KILL

by Jeffry
Scott

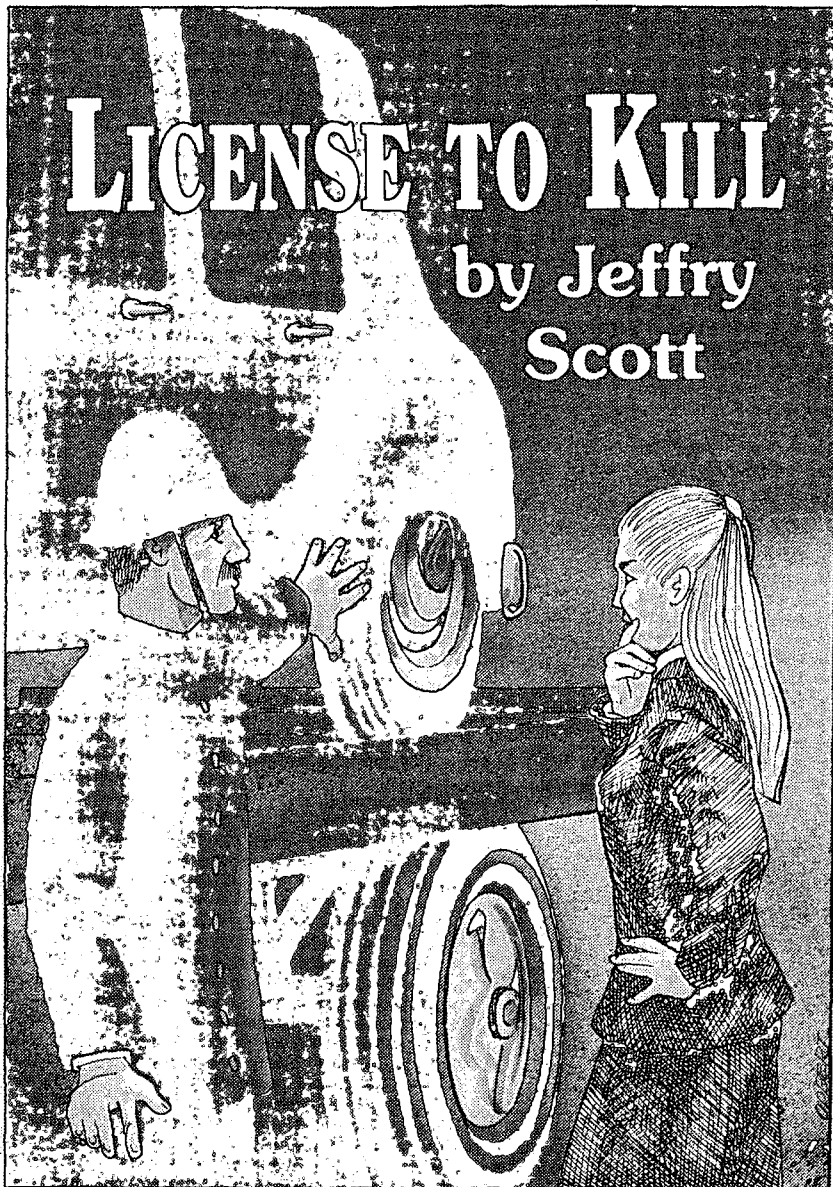


Illustration by Jim Odbert

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

According to her surgeon, backed by a pompous consultant physician, sundry mere doctors, and a brace of physiotherapists, Detective-Inspector Jill Tierce's injured leg was making good progress. Massaging it, she sighed crossly and wished that the leg shared their expert opinion.

Months ago Inspector Tierce had organized a trap for smash-and-grab raiders. When it started going wrong, she tried stopping the getaway car with the authority of the law and, in the last resort, her own body. Bad move; the robbers were captured, but by then Jill Tierce was mangled and unconscious.

Now she was back on duty . . . sort of. Inspector Tierce, personable rather than pretty, with the kind of boringly fair hair seldom thought of as blonde, muttered a most unladylike word.

At which point her office door banged open. She snatched her hand away from the damaged shin, feeling as guilty as a shoplifter caught in the act. Though restricted to light work, and only a few half days a week at that, she was doing her best to pass as fully fit, wrongly sidelined. And naturally the intruder catching her

at a disadvantage had to be Detective-Inspector Wrack.

Jim Wrack was among the Wessex-Coastal police force's fast-track figures. He looked the part: a young man so just-scrubbed clean that he might have stepped out of his cellophane wrap an instant before being sighted. Fairly crackling with energetic efficiency, too. The worst of it was, he fulfilled the image, an irksome rival to—for the sake of argument—an ambitious female colleague.

"Invented the soundless knock, have you?" the ambitious female colleague inquired sourly.

"Sorry. Lot on my mind, and I barged in." Unusually, Jim Wrack was uncertain how to proceed. White smile sheepish, he made the very last proposal that Inspector Tierce expected of him: "The thing is . . . how d'you fancy a spot of bending the rules, flouting instructions, borderline insubordinacy?"

"What a salesman! Okay, you interest me strangely."

Inspector Wrack perched on the windowsill—Jill Tierce's temporary office being larger than a broom closet, but not by much. "I know you are fully occupied at present—"

"Spare me the guff. I'm a semi-crock who kicked up such a fuss that the deputy chief invented make-work to shut me

up. Reviewing dormant cases, euphemism for hopeless ones. Careers aren't made by specializing in golden oldens."

"Yes, but you still cracked the first they gave you." She warmed to the hint of resentment in his tone. "Point is, there was no imaginable motive for killing that victim . . . until you dug it up."

She forgot the nagging ache from hip to ankle. "You've got another, Jim? Our mythical, impossible friend, somebody without an enemy in the world?"

Inspector Wrack's pristine shirt collar was a perfect fit, yet he moved uneasily as if it chafed. Then he told her about the late Mr. Flint.

By all accounts, his name had been the hardest thing about Barry Flint.

Here was a firmly and happily married man, a churchgoer—though none of his many friends thought of him as off-puttingly pious, self-righteous—and a son who was good to his parents. The very last person, surely, to have his spine severed by the close-range load from a shotgun.

This had happened some two weeks before Inspector Wrack barged in on Jill Tierce. Flint's body was discovered by his wife

Sandi. She frowned at his being five minutes late for tea, puzzled over that stretching into ten minutes, and was alarmed when Barry Flint became an unprecedented fifteen minutes late, all of which said much about the man. After half an hour, reasoning that something must be badly wrong, Mrs. Flint went looking for him.

He owned a sports equipment shop in March Street, just off the Esplanade. Her husband shut it promptly at five P.M. on weekdays, so Sandi Flint, arriving at around quarter to six, was not surprised to find the place locked and in darkness. Behind the shop was a space, less courtyard than very short, dead-end lane, where Flint parked his cherished old car. Investigating there, drawn by a reflection of street light off chrome—this was November, darkness had fallen—she saw the Rover in its usual place.

Barry Flint lay facedown beside the car. She could tell that he was past help. A plate-sized patch showed on the back of his car coat. Looking closer, Sandi Flint screamed at discovering a horrible crater surrounded by once-pale leather turned dark and pulpy by blood.

"Had to be an ambush," said Wrack. "Getting into the car, Flint was bound to turn his back on the entry from the

street. Mr. Shotgun was hiding round the corner, waited to hear the Rover's door open—it was still ajar when we got there—and blew Flint apart. No crime of impulse, this . . . you can't pull an 'ooh-the-gun-went-off-in-my-hand-during-the-struggle-Your-Lordship' defense, in those circs. Victim never saw his attacker. Okay, that's a guess, but a damned good one. Flint's hands were unmarked; he was shot in the back."

Jill Tierce nodded attentively.

"At least we have a tight window, timewise. One of our chaps, Len Durkin in Records, bought fishing tackle from Flint on his way off duty. Nearly closing time—Len being a sea angler, they joked about 'nearly missing the boat.' Flint locked up behind Sergeant Durkin at five o'clock. Mrs. Flint's 999 call to us, from the telephone box opposite the shop, was logged at ten to six.

"Sandi Flint didn't kill him. No opportunity. Women neighbors were with her until she left the house to look for her husband, she was seen arriving at the shop, passersby heard her scream a few seconds later, and came running. They didn't hear a shot, and anyway, there was nowhere for her to hide the gun. Granted, she would not be

the first wife to hire somebody else to do her dirty work . . . but Sandi? She is bereft, and it is not an act."

Gesturing frustratedly, Jim Wrack went on, "Another possibility: Barry Flint was having it off with a woman whose husband - stroke - boyfriend - stroke - father took drastic action. No way. I mean, the Flints were Mr. and Mrs. Togetherness. When hubby wasn't at work, he was at home. Or if not, due to his voluntary work, she knew exactly where he was."

His mouth pulled down at the corners. "I couldn't live in somebody's pocket like that, it would drive me mad." Mrs. Wrack was rumored to be a supreme bitch. Jill Tierce hid a smile. . . .

"Anyway, Barry Flint was no cheater. Even if he had, like, wistful ambitions in that direction—not the slightest indication he did, of course—there were no chances to play around. Ask yourself how many wives get in a tizzy over a chap being a piffing few minutes late home from work.

"Could Flint have been crooked, was my next thought. Half the fences we nick are shopkeepers, but Barry Flint was legit. What's more, ask if he had *any* vices, and everybody gives you pitying looks like you need your mind washed,

Barry was a prince, a diamond."

Inspector Wrack spoke a laugh. "Admirable character, but he isn't making my life any easier."

"Sex and dishonesty failed me; what about hate? Had he fallen out with somebody? No chance: he got on with people, smoothed disputes down, never caused them. Mild man, real Christian."

Jill Tierce said, "I read about this business in the papers. 'Gangland-style Killing' is a headline sticking in my mind..."

"Newspapers! But yes, it could be a contract killing gone wrong, mistaken identity. I'm praying otherwise. Because then there will be nothing to go on. Hark at me; there's nothing to go on, anyway."

"March Street is a backwater," Jill pointed out, "and Flint was shot there. It's not like a car park in the city center, where a mix-up could happen." She aimed a forefinger. "Right beside his shop..."

"Dismiss robbery as a motive," Wrack butted in. "All Flint's money and personal stuff was intact, and there'd been no attempt to enter the shop. Nothing there worth killing for: you'd need a furniture van, several hours, and plenty of patience to steal a grand to-

tal of six thousand quidsworth of stock.

"There has to be a reason for Flint's getting killed, but frankly, I cannot get a sniff of what that motive might be."

"You," Jill Tierce informed him inelegantly, ashamed of the pleasure involved, "are up Spit Creek without a paddle."

"Couldn't have put it better myself." Wrack's meekness made her wonder whether he was judo-trained, using the opponents' strength and confidence to throw them. It worked, she was hooked by the puzzle.

And he hadn't finished. "Even our trusty old indicator of who benefits doesn't apply. Barry Flint carried life insurance, it was a condition of the bank loan to launch the business. But it's no fortune. The shop was on a ten-year lease, two years left to go. Flint's widow can't run it, the stock will be sold off for peanuts. The mortgage on their house was covered by another insurance policy, so she will own that, free and clear. However, they bought at the peak of the property boom, and thanks to the slump, that house is worth one-third less than the Flints paid. Mrs. F. won't be a rich widow, has to earn her living.

"Fact is, we cannot find one person who needed Flint dead. The funeral was an eye-opener.

Violent death always draws gawkers, but this was an obscure shopkeeper, not some rock star, and the church was packed. The Flints had no kids, but there were plenty of teenagers in the congregation—he taught half the neighbors' children to drive, loved cars, and took that special test to join the Institute of Advanced Motorists. Lots of pensioners, too. His parents were elderly, and a few years ago, Flint talked his church into opening a day center for wrinklies, beg their pardon, senior citizens."

Cheeks puffed out, hands spread, Wrack mimed bafflement. "The wife's desolated, the community mourns. Everyone linked to the victim loses by his death. Our only suspect, solely on grounds of form, antecedents, is a case in point—Barry Flint's cousin, Kevin Mainprice, known as Skipper Mainprice."

Rarely for him, Inspector Wrack sounded indulgent. "Skipper's over twenty-five but can't grow up. A fool to himself. Spent time in youth detention, then eighteen months in real prison. Silly stuff—'borrowing' cars, drunk and disorderly, vandalism. Gets led astray, shows off. Eventually a Crown Court judge lost patience with the buffoon and put him away,

and that sobered Mainprice down.

"Do-gooder Barry took a hand after his cousin was released. Bought him a trailer so that Skipper had some kind of permanent home, talked a contact into giving him work at the new theme park out on Walkland Flats, Safari World or whatever they call it. Skipper struts around in Great White Hunter gear, though he's no more than a general handyman.

"For lack of a better choice, I put him through the wringer. Out on his rounds of the park, Skipper's off the map. Could have slipped away, killed his patron, and been back at Safari World by seven, when he officially signed off for the day."

Inspector Wrack pouted and shook his head. "But Flint paid the site rent on Skipper Mainprice's trailer and tipped up a few quid a week by way of pocket money because Skipper's pay is laughable. Where's the motive? What's more, behind a lot of bluster about finding the killer and saving the judge a job, he strikes me as genuinely cut up. Without Barry Flint for a surrogate father, Skipper is odds-on to blunder into more trouble, and he has just about enough brains to know it."

After a long silence, Jill Tierce observed, "My sidekick, Sergeant Ranulph—dreadful oaf—says that if you can't find skeletons in the closet, they must be under concrete. Girls can be pushovers for father-figures, authority figures . . . I'm thinking of all those grateful youngsters Flint taught to drive. Okay, he was on a tight domestic leash, but 'affair' is a flexible label, Jim. Ten stolen minutes in the back of a car on a dark evening—more than long enough to whisk some teenage bimbo's knickers off."

Wrack blushed, breaking eye contact. "A romantic, you."

"Realist," she corrected. "By the same token, if hubby was tied to the shop during business hours, Mrs. Flint had chances to cheat. We both know instances of a wife wanting illicit sex while staying happily married. Nasty surprise for them when the fancy man loses patience and rubs out his rival."

"Once you speak to Mrs. Flint, that idea will evaporate."

"Sorry, I could swear you just said—"

Inspector Wrack switched from stuffiness to winsome pleading. "I'd be grateful if you chatted her up, woman to woman. Don't mistake me, Sandi is above suspicion. But—" he brushed at invisible cobwebs "—there's a shadow of

a glimmer of something, when we talk. Constraint, restraint? I can't get a handle on it. She isn't lying; possibly it's subconscious, not so much hiding information as refusing to see it. Time for a fresh approach, new face."

"Never thought you'd be asking me for help," Inspector Tierce blurted. At the last moment she had chickened out of "Never suspected you of much insight, compassion, subtlety."

"Makes two of us," he assented. "Officially, I can't ask. Officially, you can't do it. But what the assistant chief doesn't see . . . If I'm wrong, then nothing changes. If you get something more out of her—well, results take precedence over regulations."

"Ain't that the truth. Tomorrow I shall need a sight of your case notes, abstracts of statements, postmortem findings, the lot." Noting his expression, Jill added, "That or nothing, my lad. Bad enough being lame, without both hands tied behind my back."

"Fair enough, I suppose. Meet me in the Incident Room, six tomorrow morning. Everything you need is there. A team meeting's set for midday, you must vanish by then. I don't want anyone asking why you are involved."

"Charming. I take it we're still holding his car?"

Inspector Wrack scowled even as he nodded. "Road Motor Patrol have it in their pound; Forensics returned the vehicle last week. Look, don't push it. I'm not worried about physical evidence. Your role is to clear up one doubt about the widow, which might be in my imagination."

"I still want a sight of his car." Jill Tierce might not have insisted, had Wrack agreed on the spot. Now she was intent on winning.

"Whatever," he conceded ungraciously. "You've got a pushy manner, Jill, never give an inch. If Mac Brotherton doesn't mind you trespassing on his territory, then it's no concern of mine."

Later the following morning Inspector Tierce limped across the razor-wired enclosure behind the Road Motor Patrol's admin bloc and garages. She wore jeans, anorak, and trainers, and was chewing an apple.

Sergeant Mackenzie Brotherton, boss of the vehicle impound yard and one of her few friends in the Wessex-Coastal force, was expecting her. "Nice old motor, that," he said, nodding at the car secured aboard a low-slung trailer. "I shall run

it round to Mrs. Flint on my day off. She can't drive, see. Not much value in used cars since the slump, but she might make a few bob, since this un's been looked after."

"You're a good guy, Mac—whatever everybody else says."

"Impudence," Brotherton retorted placidly, handing over ignition and trunk keys. The Rover's interior was disappointing: well kept, no litter, none of those convenient scraps of incriminating letters or matchbooks signposting a rendezvous.

"When she got there, the cupboard was bare," Sergeant Brotherton teased. Inspector Tierce wrinkled her nose at him, and trudged right around the car, stopping to stare. Up on the trailer, it could be seen from a novel perspective. And from this angle, something about the Rover's paintwork was . . . what *was* it?

Drawn by her puzzlement, he smirked. "If a real panel-beater had done this, you'd never see the difference." Spatulate fingers slid between tire and wing, exploring inside the wheel arch. "Rough as a bad divorce in here. Few whacks with a sliding hammer, few passes with an emery wheel, fancy re-spray, bob's your uncle! Until

rust eats through from the blind side."

Inspector Tierce, learning more than she wanted to know, was restive, but he was just hitting stride.

"Everybody's at it," Brotherton grumbled. "Body repairs are pricy. So there's a new black-economy dodge these days, amateur panel-beaters—chaps have seen it done and think that's a training course. Great game for gypsies, used to weave baskets, steal your washing off the line, now they bodge up cars. - March of progress . . ."

"Stop blethering, Mac. You're saying this car was in a crash?"

They had been at cross-purposes. "I thought you knew, luv. Flint had a mishap out Five Chapels way, back in the summer."

"Damn and blast Jim Wrack, he never mentioned it. Nothing in the case notes, I'm sure."

"Doubt he was aware. It's not revelant, renevant, cannot get that bloomin' word straight. Happened months ago and all put right long since."

"Relevant, Mac. Everything is, concerning unlawful death."

"You know best, Miss C.I.D. Not Flint's fault, anyhow. He was well below the speed limit when some bright spark pulled out without looking. Hardly a

crash, just dents and scrapes. But a county car crew observed it, breath-tested both drivers. Flint was sober, and they'd seen he was blameless. T'other driver was legless drunk, so they took him in. End of story."

Yet it wasn't, for Brotherton continued, "I play snooker for our lot against the county team; one of them mentioned it at the time. Found it comical, a chap with that Advanced Motorist badge getting his fender bent. Flint's shop being near here, I'd often see him in that car. Struck me at the time he must have loved the old Rover because it was showroom condition again right after the accident. Pathetic, the way some blokes get so protective over tin boxes on wheels."

"This accident business should have been on record."

"Dare say it is, but not with us. County matter, d'ye see—Five Chapels is part of the city for practical purposes, but jurisdiction is another thing. County must have paperwork, but apart from his being in the other car, it was nothing to do with Flint."

"Maybe," Jill mumbled. "Interesting, all the same."

Why or how it was of interest, she had no idea. This wasn't about ideas but instinct. The significance—if any, the self-doubting side of her nature

argued—would emerge in due time.

Meanwhile, a tempting loose thread, missed by Inspector Wrack, was there to be tugged at. . . .

Somebody in County Police HQ owed Inspector Tierce a favor. Within an hour, she was studying photocopied documentation on the traffic accident involving Barry Flint. It was much as Sergeant Brotherton recalled: no injuries or substantial damage caused. Charles Easton, driver of the offending car, proved to have too much alcohol in his system. The case was still on its way to court.

Jill Tierce rang her contact. "Yes, I got the plain brown envelope. What's this cryptic note about a follow-up letter to Barry Flint, re forthcoming court appearance. Surely he wasn't being prosecuted?"

"Wait one. . . ." From the sounds, her Woman Police Constable friend was riffing through the original file. "Ah, I see. No, that's just our guv'nor, Superintendent Charman, riding off in all directions. He's a mega fusspot, no *i* left undotted nor *t* uncrossed. Flint was asked at the crash scene if he would testify against the other driver. Dithered, said he was a busy man. Two of our lads and an ambulance driver had seen

the incident, so he wasn't really needed.

"But our anal-retentive lord and master still wanted Flint to testify. Academic now, 'less Mr. Charman arranges a seance. The case against Easton? It's going ahead; we have witnesses coming out of our ears, plus a positive breath test. Niente problema, as they say in Wales. Why are you going into all the ins and outs, then?"

"Wish I knew, old dear," Inspector Tierce confessed.

Later the same day she met Charles Easton. A blithe youngster, disarmingly open and a rotten suspect. "It's a bummer, inspector—I'm due to lose my driving license and get a whacking fine. Serves me right," Easton confided. "When the barmaid poured me out of that pub, I started the car, checked my rear mirror, and still managed to turn smack into someone minding his own business, heading home for tea and telly. He looked pig-sick, and no wonder."

While intrigued by Jill Tierce's warrant card, Easton showed no anxiety over being questioned. "Did you know the other driver?" she asked.

"Total stranger. Darned sure he'll know me, after that. Does it matter?"

"If you're convicted of driving under the influence of drink or

drugs, will that affect your career, Mr. Easton?"

"Not if, when," he amended cheerily. "I did it, why waste time arguing the toss?"

"That's not what I asked." She tried for severity, but he *was* attractive, engaging. Too young for her, but what an argument for being obscenely affluent, with hot and cold running toy-boys . . .

"Sorry, now I'm with you. Not to worry, I'm fireproof, can't be sacked." He winked conspiratorially. "Not as long as Mummy rules the roost—Dad owns the company!"

Scratch one new motive, Inspector Tierce mused wryly. Young Easton wasn't hurting, even during Britain's worst recession in living memory. It had been a silly notion anyway: somebody so desperate to keep their driving license, and the job on which it might depend, that they resorted to murder. Furthermore, Barry Flint's death had not shelved the driving case.

So much for intuition. Honesty made her admit putting undue weight on the incident, just because it had escaped efficient Inspector Wrack. As if cued by ESP, the phone was ringing when she returned to her broom-closet office. "Are you going to talk to Mrs. Flint,

or what?" Wrack demanded. "We made a deal, days ago."

"I don't work for you," she snapped. It sounded so mean-spirited that Jill lied, "I've been clearing my desk, if you must know. I plan to see her this afternoon."

The Flint home was a 1960's semi-detached in a street behind seafront public tennis courts. Driving slowly, checking numbers on front gates, Jill thought that it must be pleasant in spring and summer, sipping drinks on the patio to the distant music of serve and return. Less pleasant in winter: lawns looked soggy and unkempt, wind keened through the diamond wire of the deserted courts' fences.

She was easing out of the car when a man appeared at the front gate. Now she understood Jim Wrack's remark about Skipper Mainprice posing as a white hunter. Hard not to smile pityingly at the glossy kneeboots, twill breeches, many-pocketed safari jacket, and broad-brimmed hat. Poor chump, what *did* he look like? Shame about the fancy dress because he was a bit of a hunk. Wrack's thumbnail portrait hadn't prepared her for that. Even the Technicolor splendor of a recent black eye failed to spoil his looks. If anything, the

mouse modified any male-model handsomeness.

Nodding when she produced her warrant card, Mainprice said, "You'll be the police again, Sandi told me. I'm poor old Barry's cousin, last of the line. I'm trying to help her keep going. Any leads, miss? I've got my ear to the ground—and if I get to that bastard first . . ."

Appearing on the doorstep, the Widow Flint, tone firm without shrewishness, struck Jill Tierce as having no trouble in keeping going. "On your way, Skipper, else you'll be late for work."

Trying to keep up a front as dominant male, Mainprice lowered his voice. "Living on her nerves, poor lass." His jaw jutted, he might have been checking the African veldt for prowling lions. "Duty calls, miss." Ruining the image, he wobbled away on the bicycle that Jill had noticed propped against the hedge.

Sandi Flint, leading her indoors, said, "Sorry about that, Skipper means well. Compulsive fantasist; in his mind he runs that stupid safari park. Skipper thought the sun rose and set on Barry—so I suppose I'm lumbered with Bwana Mainprice for as long as I live. God, what a bitchy thing to say." She did not sound particularly regretful.

"One's own relations are a rum lot, but the partner's family are always worse."

"You don't need to break the ice, coax me along. I'll tell you everything a hundred times over, if it helps to get whoever . . . took Barry away." Showing her caller into the front room, Mrs. Flint sat in an upright chair, feet together, hands in lap, and waited.

Jill Tierce took the lady at her word. After forty-five minutes, she had an inkling of what troubled Inspector Wrack. Sandi Flint, despite bruise-dark hollows around her eyes and the new lines carved on her pale face, was composed, correct, and subtly, hardly perceptibly, guarded. "Obviously you loved him, Sandi. Obviously he deserved it. But there is such a thing as being too loyal."

"Barry was the best, of course I'm loyal!"

Try again. . . . "With people loved and looked up to, one shades things in their favor. Especially to outsiders. For instance, your husband prided himself on being a good driver. But he still had an accident—trivial, not his doing, and a while ago. Seeing that as a blemish on something he was good at, you never mentioned it to Inspector Wrack or the other officers. It has no bearing on

what happened, but supposing there are other things . . . glossed over, skipped?"

"What are you talking about? No, wait, I understand what you're getting at. But an accident . . . with the car? Not my husband." Reading Jill's expression, Mrs. Flint became shrill. "There was no accident! He couldn't have kept *that* from me."

Inspector Tierce, catching the stressed word, stayed impassive. Let the woman calm down, then zero in on whatever it was that Sandi Flint did believe Flint was concealing from her.

But Mrs. Flint wouldn't let it go. "I'm not daft, you know. Just because I can't drive . . . I still see the car every morning when he leaves, every night when he gets back." Her poise cracked momentarily as she recognized a wrong tense. Impatiently, tears were brushed away. "If there'd been an accident, I would have known. He'd have told me, anyway. Goodness, 'told me,' Barry would have gone on about it for ages."

Jill Tierce's leg was nagging, and the interview had been hard going. "I'm not daft, either. Your husband was driving his Rover at Five Chapels on the sixth of August when he was involved in a collision. That's a fact, witnessed by two

of my colleagues; details were taken. What on earth is your problem over this, dear?"

Sandi Flint laughed jaggedly, triumphantly. "Sixth of August? Told you it was nonsense! We flew to Ibiza at end of July, stayed two weeks. Same as we've done for years. Didn't get home until August the tenth. Road accident, indeed! Barry's motor was locked in the garage the whole time. How could he have had a crash—we were hundreds of miles away, in a different country."

“**D**id you know that Kevin Mainprice tried to kill himself while he was in prison? Not a tentative, cry-for-help job, either. They only just saved him.”

"I'd have thought Skipper too shallow for depths of despair." Inspector Wrack was dismissive. "What I need is your input on Sandi Flint, not fringe things."

"You'll find it relevant." Inspector Tierce, concluding that his patience was running out, hurried on. "Your hunch was justified, Mrs. Flint was holding something back. Not information, just an impression. Sandi's a decent sort; she wouldn't say anything that

might just be prejudice over someone she resented as a parasite.

"Anyway, her impression was that shortly before his death, her husband cooled towards Skipper. Nothing overt, but she knew Barry so well. When she asked whether they had fallen out, he laughed it off. Sandi couldn't believe it was anything sinister because Skipper idolized her husband. Making her even more reluctant to bring it up."

"That's it?" Jim Wrack complained.

"By no means." She was enjoying herself. "Sandi Flint opened up once I convinced her that Skipper had posed as Barry to get out of a potentially nasty scrape." Jill recapped her information on the car accident at Five Chapels.

"The Flints were abroad, Skipper was the only person with access to their house, garage, and car—they left him the keys so he could water plants and so forth. Sandi says her husband never carried his driving license on holiday; one less document to be lost or stolen. He was a careful man. Passport and credit cards were sufficient I.D. for their vacation.

"Obviously Skipper took the Rover, meaning he was driving while banned, and without in-

surance. He drew a suspended sentence the last time he pulled that stunt. Get caught again, and he'd be punished for two offenses. And this is a guy who loathes detention so much he nearly killed himself.

"That piffling little accident was terribly bad luck. The good luck was that the cops didn't know him. He bluffed them with cousin Barry's license—couldn't happen in countries where your license carries a photograph as well as a name—had the Rover repaired, and believed he was free and clear.

"But only until the county force wrote to Barry Flint, asking him to give evidence in the case against the other driver. Flint must have worked out the rest from there. Hence his changed attitude towards Skipper Mainprice."

Inspector Wrack was thoughtful. "The county boys couldn't *make* Flint give evidence. They might ask, but they'd never subpoena him for something so trivial, with ample supporting testimony and a defendant ready to plead guilty."

Willing herself not to shake him, she countered, "Flint was a straight-arrow, remember, to him a police request was an order. My guess is he confronted Skipper. 'Make a clean breast

of it, and if, God forbid, you have to go inside, I'll set you up again afterwards.' That'd be his line.

"But Skipper isn't in the clean-breast business. Driving while banned was the least of it; now he was looking at heavy charges—using false documents, misleading the police. He could hear the cell door banging. And the worst of it was, he could *still* get away with it, providing his benefactor, Barry Flint, kept his ruddy mouth shut. Only for all his kindness, Barry wasn't ready to break the law or help his cousin break it.

"There's your missing motive, Jim. Skipper Mainprice wouldn't kill his meal ticket. Unless, by his lights, he *had* to. He'd been ready to kill himself, so why not knock off somebody else?"

"Return to planet Earth," Wrack proposed. "All we have is the strong possibility that Mainprice used Flint's car, driving license, and identity. That can be established: those county coppers ought to be able to identify the man who flashed Barry Flint's license. The rest is all in your head."

"At least you didn't say pretty little head." Inspector Tierce spoke abstractedly. "Skipper has been in a fight recently—splendid black eye.

That might be worth following up. And the weapon is still missing, yes?"

"Sawn-off shotgun doesn't take much hiding. We did a full-scale search of the immediate crime scene, no joy. Finding it may not get us any forerader—a sawn-off is illicit and therefore untraceable, by definition." Inspector Wrack sighed, drumming his fingers on a virgin blotter. "Even chumps like Mainprice know enough to wear gloves."

"Nice to find it, all the same. You say Skipper has the run of that safari park. It's at least two miles to Flint's shop. If he did slip away, he wouldn't dare 'borrow' another car, for fear of getting stopped. He probably cycled there and back. Had to get back before he was missed and lost his alibi, such as it is. The weapon would have been dumped on his return to the park, he must know all the best caches."

"Any idea of the manpower needed for a search like that?" Wrack groaned. "It's a socking great area."

His eyes went blank for an instant before she was given the guileless smile of a politician. "Time we went public on this. I wouldn't feel right, breaking the case on a lead from you and having to keep your part secret."

"Tell the assistant chief I've been poking my nose in, albeit by invitation? Is that wise, Jim?" Out of sight, Inspector Tierce crossed her fingers, silently urging him to make the suggestion. Please don't throw me into the briar patch, she was thinking.

Not to mention making sure that it's all down to me, if this doesn't pan out, she translated mentally. Two hours later she was officially recruited to the investigative team.

"No point in putting me on the safari park search," Jill argued, "with my poor bad leg. But if I were a sawn-off shotgun, where would I be? In a place people stay away from, like the lions' section of the park. Or under water—isn't there an artificial lake for the wading birds?"

"Thanks." Inspector Wrack was terse. "Enjoy yourself, off with the raggle-taggle gypsies."

Long after the arrest, trial, and conviction of Barry Flint's executioner, Jill Tierce learned that she was being slandered as some kind of freak, a C.I.D. psychic. Inspector Jim Wrack couldn't get over it. He did all the slogging, admin, and drudgework; she kept lucking out. Take the business

with the gypsies: Flint's car could have been treated by anyone among scores of legitimate garages or itinerant metal-bashers, but she found that repairman first time of asking.

"You've got no chance," Inspector Wrack was reported to have grumbled, "against an expletive-deleted fortune teller with a crystal ball."

As punishment, she did not explain the prosaic truth. Nothing supernatural; she had just followed the path of least resistance, started with the easiest option.

Skipper Mainprice lived in a trailer at the Sunny Fields site on the city outskirts. Sunny Fields was run by a retired farmer, a paternal tyrant. His tenants were mainly young-marrieds saving up for their first proper house, with a sprinkling of recently-divorced males crippled by alimony. The place was orderly, slightly downtrodden, and no trouble to the police.

The same could not be said of the caravan site across the road. King Hal's Meadow was where the borough council stored gypsies, tinkers, and New Age travelers, while hoping that they would move on and be some other local authority's scourge.

Sergeant Brotherton had said that gypsies often repaired

cars, the suspect lived within a hundred yards of the largest concentration of gypsies in three counties. What better place to begin?

The small print was that Inspector Tierce quite liked gypsies and had something of a special relationship with them. She was saddened by their unenviable status as the last minority whom civilized folk were allowed and almost expected to discriminate against openly.

Nevertheless, she locked her car and kept it within sight, throughout her visit to King Hal's Meadow. And she wore rubber boots, for the site was muddy; the council tolerated denizens of the ghetto it was forced to provide, but the last thing it wanted was for them to feel at home.

Soon Jill Tierce had doffed her sheepskin coat. Half seriously considered stripping to her bra if the dickering dragged on. She was on her fourth call of the morning, in a luxurious, overheated trailer with pink-quilted walls and countless mirrors. It put her in mind of a huge, gimcrack jewelry box doubling as sauna cabin.

Her hostess was an olive-skinned woman, sinuously slender apart from an extraordinary, Partonesque bosom. Mae Groome, india ink hair

falling straight to her hips, could have been any age between twenty and forty. Actually she was approaching the half century.

Dispensing herb tea, Mae nagged, "Hitler tried to murder all of us along with the Jews, you know. Shame, clever girl like you, nothing better to do than persecute poor Travelers."

"Change the record, sweetheart, you always lay Hitler on me." The tea was delicious, though it made Jill sweat. "Try more recent history—a randy businessman in a posh hotel room who lost every penny he had plus the trousers his wallet was in? I'm the clever girl who talked him out of pressing charges, said you'd made a happy man very old but his wife might not see it that way. He'd had his money's worth, his trousers were out on the fire escape, and at least you'd left him his plastic and the knockoff Rolex. Theft, deception, prostitution—Nelson might balk at turning a blind eye to all that."

"What a memory she has!" Mae smiled thinly. "Like to help, missy, but I've been down south most of this year. How can I know what people have been up to here?"

"You'd know. They needn't have been up to anything, as in illegal. But maybe some of the men do bodywork repairs. Cars,

fixing dents, quick respray. Maybe one of them worked on a Rover back in the summer for a feller living not a hundred yards away."

Mae's long fingers tightened on her cup.

"Oh no, not him. He's a special friend. Arrest me if you like, makes no difference. I know nothing."

"Start again . . . I just want to talk to the guy. Scout's honor, cross my heart. If the mechanic is dodgy, that's not going to be a problem. All I'm after is what he can tell me."

"This needs thinking on."

The other woman sipped her tea.

"Swear it won't get him in bother, you won't take him away? Cross me up, and I'll curse you and your unborn children. I can make it work."

"You're a working girl," Inspector Tierce agreed blandly. "Among other things . . . come on, you owe me and I've never let you down."

Reaching a decision, Mae scowled, "It was a fair fight, Pete was provoked. The man promised a hundred quid for fixing that car on the hurry-up but never paid the full amount. And he'd been taking liberties with Pete before that, even. Using his stuff, sneaking into the workshop when Pete's back was turned. What's a man to

do? He couldn't get the money, so my Pete took it out of Skipper's hide."

Jill struggled back into pull-over and coat. "Introduce me to your boyfriend, Mae. He sounds my type."

Peter Connolly turned out to be a boilersuited giant, bearded like a mattress factory explosion, hands gloved in oil and ingrained grease. After a muttered conference with Mae, he nodded heavily.

"She says you'll not bring me harm. What do you want to know?"

Yes, Peter Connolly knew Skipper Mainprice from over the road there. Skipper had helped him out in the workshop, once upon a time. In early August, Skipper came knocking, white like he'd seen a ghost, offering to pay top whack to have a Rover fettled. Trifling damage; Connolly worked through the night, made the old car like new.

The giant led Inspector Tierce to the remains of a single-decker bus on the far shore of the mud sea. The gutted interior was fitted with workbenches, a portable generator-powered lathe, vertical drill, air-compressor, and welding gear. Tools, dominated by hammers and padded mallets, were arrayed on a pegboard bulkhead.

"You think Mainprice was using this place without your permission?"

"Know he was," Peter Connolly corrected. "Caught him a time or two. Fixing his old bike and such. Might have let it go, him being kind of a pal; but he'd steal a spanner here, a screwdriver there, and that wasn't on. My tools are my living. The last time, he messed up my best hacksaw, blunted a new blade."

Inspector Tierce's scalp tingled. But the workshop was depressingly neat, free of odds and ends.

"You've tidied the place since then," she guessed aloud, glumly.

"Not him," Mae scoffed. "Everything goes out the window, out of sight, out of mind." She squeezed Connolly's arm, maiden and mother at the same moment.

"Out the window? Show me!"

Behind the bus, among rampant nettles, lay a squalid mound: treadless tires, dead batteries, rusting scraps of chrome trim, broken engine components and tools, a fridge without a door and a freezer cabinet lid without the freezer. Bits of radiator hose showed here and there, in unpleasant parody of maggots working on heaped automotive remains . . .

"—bad, miss."

Startled, Jill Tierce realized that Mae and Connolly were staring at her. "It's not so bad, miss," he repeated defensively. "I'll tidy it all up before we move on."

"Not on your life, leave it alone," said Inspector Tierce. "Don't panic when a load of coppers turn up, Peter. You're not in trouble. They will just be sorting through that junk."

Extracts from interview conducted, after caution, with Kevin Roland Mainprice, a.k.a. Skipper Price or Mainprice, No Fixed Address (Sunny Fields caravan site, Highpoint Hill, Baychester, Wessex). Interview commenced 6:28 P.M.; adjourned for refreshments 7:30-8:05 P.M.; resumed at 8:07 P.M.; terminated 10:40 P.M. Audio ref WCF/CID/332. RESTRICTED.

Q: Kevin, what can you tell me about a firearm recovered from the grounds of Wessex Big Game World, where you are employed as a general laborer?

A: Hundreds of people go there every day. It was in . . . I heard you found a sawn-off in the birds' pool. The Rogate road runs alongside, there's only a wire fence. Somebody could have chucked it over without getting out of their car. Who-

ever dumped it needn't have been inside, even.

Q: I said a firearm. How did you know it was a sawn-off shotgun?

A: Don't get clever, Mr. Wrack. Barry was killed with a sawn-off, you're looking for the bastard what murdered him. I can add two and two, thanks. It's evil, you making out I had anything to do with it. He was my best friend, done me nothing but good, ask anybody. I shall be in trouble without him.

Q: Let's move on. Do you know a certain Peter Connolly?

A: You know I do—one of them dirty gyppos over the road from my trailer. Lying sod, got a grudge against me. We had it out the other day, I give him a knuckle sandwich, learnt him some manners.

Q: My information is that the dispute was over payment for work you asked Connolly to carry out.

There was additional friction over your use of his tools and workshop.

A: *No response.*

Q: Kevin, we're on the same side, surely. I want the killer of your cousin, you tell me that you want the killer caught. See my point?

A: Look, there is something I have told lies about. I want everything out in the open. This

will get me in deep, but not for murder. It's a driving thing.

Q: So the position was this—you took Barry's car, got involved in an accident, and then passed yourself off as him, to avoid the consequences. What did Barry Flint say when he found out?

A: He didn't. It never came up.

Q: It must have, Kevin. Look, here is the original letter from the county police to Barry Flint, asking him to give evidence over an alleged incident of driving while under the influence of drink and drugs, and driving without due care. He received it not long before his death. He must have discussed it with you.

A: No. He never twigged it was me driving. He never dreamed it was down to me.

Q: Come, we're all grownups here. Barry gets a letter about an accident that happened while he was abroad. Only one person had access to his car and his driving license. But he never dreamed you were behind it. How do you account for that, Kev?

A: I bloody can't, all right? Maybe he thought it was just a mistake over the car's number. Knew it couldn't be him, so he forgot about it. Must have, because he never said nothing to me.

Q: We've spent a lot of time on this. Your answers regarding the accident, and the subsequent impersonation of Barry Flint, are unsatisfactory. In any case, proceedings may be taken. Do you understand?

A: Hard not to. All right, yes, sure.

Q: Anything else you want to get off your chest?

A: Isn't that little lot enough? They won't put me inside, will they, Mr. Wrack? Harmless spin in the car, then that clown runs into me.

I got family responsibilities now Barry's gone, I deserve probation. Compassionate grounds, eh?

Q: I would like to return to your fracas with Peter Connolly. It wasn't just owing him money, right? You ignored his warnings over sneaking in and using his workshop without permission.

A: Workshop? Crappy old bus with gear doesn't work half the time. I hardly ever set foot there. Only a day or two, helping out. Until Barry got me a proper job.

Q: Think about it, Kevin. We can prove you made use of the tools and facilities in Connolly's mobile workshop, shortly before your cousin's death.

A: Pete's saying that? The man's got this obsession about

my using his stuff. Fancy believing a bloody gypsy. He's out to frame me, Mr. Wrack. That's it, lead you the wrong way. I bet it was him cut that shotgun down. And used it, murdering bastard.

Q: No, Kevin, you did. We recovered a portion of shotgun barrel, approximately twenty inches in length, from scrap behind the workshop. Metal fragments in one of Connolly's hacksaws came from that barrel. Fingerprints on the barrel are yours, Kevin. Your thumb on top of the tube and three fingers underneath. How do you account for that?

A: It must be a mistake.

Q: True, and you made it. In too much of a hurry to finish before Connolly caught you. So when the barrel was sawn nearly through, you snapped it off like a stick. Leaving a tiny little spur of metal on the remaining bit, exactly matching the discarded tube we found. You wore gloves to shoot, but you ought to have put them on earlier. Forgot about gripping the muzzle end while preparing the weapon. Did you hear somebody coming? Had to hide the gun in a hurry and chucked the spare piece of barrel onto the junk pile? Hiding a leaf in a forest, you could always get it back later. But you decided it was best left alone, in case Pe-

ter Connolly caught you—by then he was really keeping his eyes skinned, thanks to that blunted hacksaw.

That's the truth of it, correct?

A: I wasn't there, I never done that. Where would I get a shotgun?

Q: Let's recap. In Connolly's workshop is a heavy-duty hacksaw we can prove was used to shorten the murder weapon. Near the workshop, which you are known to have used quite regularly, is part of a shotgun barrel bearing your fingerprints. At your workplace we recovered a sawn-off shotgun with gouges on the woodwork exactly matching the jaws of a vise in Connolly's workshop. See how it all fits together, same as the shotgun?

A: Gypsy Pete must of done all that, and killed Barry. You and him are fitting me up.

Q: Apart from having no possible motive, Connolly was a hundred and twenty miles away at a horse fair in Wales when your cousin died. Why don't you face up to the evidence, Kev?

A: *No response.*

Q: (*D-Insp. Tierce*) Kevin, I'm sorry for you. I'm not just saying that. Prison horrifies you, maybe fear of it unbalanced you. We always say this, but only because it's true: tell what

really happened, and you will feel ever so much better.

A: I did it for Barry as much as me, and that is God's truth. He did find out. I begged him to let me stand up in court and give evidence as him, good chance of getting away with it. They wasn't after me, I was just a witness.

He wouldn't have it. Wanted to help but didn't dare. Lovely feller, but gutless, deep down. Said if he got in trouble, then he couldn't look after Sandi nor me any more.

I mustn't go back inside. Barry knew what happened last time. It was gutting him, but he couldn't see any way round. Said either I went to the law, or he would. So I pretended I was going, end of the week. He give me that long. But I couldn't. If they'd put me inside, it would have killed Barry. Well . . . you know what I mean. He was all heart, such a smashing bloke. Barry nearly cried when he made me promise to own up. Part of it was he dreaded Sandi finding out. She always expected me to let him down, he hated that.

Then it came to me, how I could fix things for both of us. My way, Barry wouldn't turn me in and have to live with it. He would never have forgiven himself. Believe what you please, it was for him as well as

me. I used a gun to make it quick and clean. Could have bashed him or used a knife. But it had to be painless so he'd never know.

I hope you're proud of yourselves. You will be the death of me, and it could have been all right. Barry never suffered, Sandi will be okay, she's a worker and gets a house out of it. I wouldn't have broken the law ever again, never looked at a car. If that bloke hadn't crashed into me... he's the one, you ought to throw the book at him.

Interview extracts end.

Inspector Tierce told Inspector Wrack, "I want to throw up. That creep truly sees himself as the injured party."

"People are human," Jim Wrack yawned. They were sitting in his office much later the same night, prisoners of that fatigue-becalmed, anticlimactic sense of wanting to go home while lacking energy to move.

Stung, she snapped, "Don't you care about anything except your onwards-ever-upwards career?" Unfair. Certainly Jim Wrack infuriated her, but so did the unpalatable insight that she was nowhere near ready for normal duties. It had been a long day, admittedly, but sedentary, yet her leg was hellish.

Wrack, scrubbed face darkened by bristles, took the taunt as a genuine query.

"I care. I knew something was bothering Sandi Flint. Her and the husband, so close all those years. Terrific marriage, no secrets. Claustrophobic from my standpoint, but it worked for them.

"Then all of a sudden everything she believes in is compromised. Barry Flint was keeping a secret from her. . . ."

He stood up, tugging his jacket down, adjusting the tie's knot.

"You don't get it. She might have believed what she told you about sensing an atmosphere between Barry and Skipper, but that wasn't the real trouble. What Sandi did experience, I expect, was a feeling that something was going on which she'd be the last to hear about. And what does any wife fear when the spouse fobs her off and shuts her out... has the aura of knowing something she doesn't? What's the last suspicion she wants to share with strangers?"

"Another woman." Jill was chastened by her own denseness. "Sandi thought he was being unfaithful—that's what was bugging her. She wouldn't let on, but gave off enough vibes to alert you. As soon as

I explained about the accident, she understood that adultery didn't figure—he was covering up for Skipper. We've given her back an ideal husband."

"Now you've got there," Jim Wrack approved, grinning. His good humor evaporated in-

stantly. He mused so softly that Jill Tierce only just heard it: "That poor woman grieving, a good man dead, all because an idiot stole a ride in an old car. And it's not over yet. Ask yourself how long Skipper will last where's he's going."

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

The pusher was Nora Iglehof, the junior art student.

RANK	NAME	STREET	SUBJECT	NATIVE
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Sophomore	Karl Feiner	Birch	dentistry	0
Freshman	Mack Helvie	Cedar	biology	+

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FICTION

Four of a Kind

by Robert Lopresti



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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I guess I was lucky the arm of my rocking chair broke. It could have been my arm instead.

The day had a flying start when the giant who'd been knocking at my door put a hand on my chest and shoved hard enough to send me tumbling backwards. I hit the chair on my way down.

"Now hold on," I said, but I didn't stand up to say it. No point in provoking the guy, not when he was a head taller than I was and built like a sumo on steroids.

He shut the door gently, not taking his eyes off me. "You're Marty Crow, the private eye."

I already knew that, so I said nothing.

"I work for Chas Carson."

"Good. Tell him he owes me for a new chair."

"You owe *him*," said the nightmare. "Three grand."

"Like hell I do." Chas Carson is one of the few bookies in Atlantic City I never do business with, mostly because of his taste in employees.

"Donnie Jernsted is dead," the beast told me.

"Old news. That was weeks ago."

"Chas Carson's taking over his book. Paying his debts and collecting what he's owed."

"Very commendable. What's it got to do with me?"

He pointed a heavy finger. "You owed Jernsted three grand. Now you owe us three grand."

"Now, wait a minute. I paid Donnie, every cent."

"You owe us—"

I held out my hands, surrendering. This guy was clearly not authorized to make executive decisions. "Okay, okay. Take me to your leader."

It's depressing to see the struggling small businessman lose out to the cold, impersonal corporation.

Take Donnie Jernsted, for instance. He ran a small independent neighborhood book. God knows he was struggling. Someone put him out of business with a switchblade knife through the chest, and now Carson was taking over.

Chas Carson isn't a corporation, technically, but he fits the cold, impersonal part just fine. You'll get a hug from the phone company before you get one from him.

I didn't want a hug. I wanted justice, and that's long odds anywhere.

"I don't appreciate your sending a thug to pound on my door."

"Good," said Carson. "See, Crow, that's the whole idea with threats. You're not sup-

posed to enjoy them. Just pay me the money."

"I paid Donnie."

"No, you didn't." He patted a familiar black spiral notebook on his desk. "I have Jernsted's ledger and his appointment calendar. You were supposed to pay on the day he died, but you never showed up."

"The day Donnie died? When was that?"

Carson frowned. "Monday, the last day of March."

"Son of a gun." The arithmetic caught up with me. "That is the day I paid him, just before I went upstate. I was in Newark for six days, looking for a missing teenager. When I got back, I heard Donnie was dead, but I didn't know it was the same day."

Carson was unimpressed. "You didn't pay him. It's not marked in his ledger."

"Maybe he got killed before he could write it down."

Chas sat back and looked at me thoughtfully. "Maybe he did, at that. Killed by you?"

"Me? Hell, no." I frowned. "Wait a second. How come you have the ledger book? And how come the cops haven't been around asking me these questions?"

"Just luck." Carson looked smug. "Donnie got in over his head on a couple of playoff games. He laid off a little ac-

tion on me, and I sent Roland around to collect."

"Roland?"

Chas pointed to the guy who broke my chair. Hell of a name for a human forklift.

"Roland found Donnie dead. He picked up the ledgers and beat it."

"Found him dead or made him dead?" I asked.

"Found. Does Roland look like he'd kill a man with a knife?"

There was logic in that. Even if he had wanted to, I'm not sure Roland could have used a little switchblade knife. His hands were just too big.

"Whoever snuffed him took all the money in the place, but Roland got the books. I'm paying Donnie's debts and inheriting his business. Good will." He smiled; not a pretty sight. "I also inherited his accounts receivable. So pay up."

I shifted in my chair. This arrangement would never stand up in probate court, but out on the street Roland could sure as hell make it hop up and salute.

"I paid Donnie. I don't owe you anything. But I'll tell you what I'll do."

"You'll pay me."

I shook my head irritably. "Better than that. I'll find Jernsted's killer for you."

Carson's jaw dropped. "Why the hell would I care about that?"

"You can't let people go around stabbing bookies with impunity. Where's your professional pride? It's got to be bad for business. Besides, the killer is probably one of those customers you inherited." I patted the ledger book. "One of your new friends. Do we have a deal?"

Carson looked at me thoughtfully. "You're a hell of a talker. Is that why Jernsted let a deadbeat private eye like you get down three grand?"

I said nothing. I was not about to reveal a trade secret. The truth was I had discovered Donnie's hidden passion a while back: he was a whale freak. Whenever he started yelling for money, I brought up driftnet fishing and he forgot what he'd been talking about.

Last year I helped the Feds bust some people for dumping toxic waste off the coast, and Donnie mistook me for a hero. That's why he let me lose so much.

Carson sighed. "Okay. You find the killer and I'll eat the debt. You'd never come up with the cash anyway."

So now I had a client. Not a paying client, but you could say I was motivated.

An hour later I was on my way to meet some of Donnie's other customers. Carson had shown me the datebook and the

ledger. Donnie had been expecting four clients that day, all of them big losers on weekend games, due to make hefty payments. No order was indicated.

If I could figure out who came last, I might have the man. I decided to start with the only customer who was clearly not the killer. The only customer beside me, that is.

I knew Pat Isaacs was the first to see Donnie because his payment had been recorded, lucky guy, so Chas hadn't sent Roland to hunt him down.

He was short and bald, and soon he was going to complete the cliché by turning fat. I found him where he worked, at a jeweler's on Atlantic Avenue, a few blocks from Jernsted's apartment.

"Can I talk with you for a moment?"

He looked me over. His eyes were a little popped, making him look permanently surprised.

"About jewelry?" I guess I didn't look like a customer.

"About your gambling problem." I gave him my card.

Isaacs shot a look at the other guy behind the counter. A graying, older man: his boss, I supposed.

"I'm gonna take a break," he said loudly. The older man nodded, not even looking up.

He led me out to the street

and started walking away, hands in his pockets. I hurried to catch up. "So what's this about?" he asked. He was trying to sound tough, but his reedy voice didn't quite make it.

"Donnie Jernsted," I told him. "He got killed the day you went to pay him off."

"Is that right?" He sounded bored. "Then why haven't the cops been around to talk to me?"

"Because Chas Carson has the ledger and the datebook. He asked me to look into the killing."

"Chas called you in?" He looked amused. "I thought he always hired the best. And why should he care who killed Donnie?"

"It's the bookie's code," I said solemnly. "They always look out for each other."

"Oh, right."

"Anyway, Chas wants this settled quickly. The other choice is to have cops harassing a bunch of innocent gamblers."

"So ask your questions."

"When did you get to Donnie's place?"

"Around eleven fifteen, eleven thirty. I started work at noon."

"And what did you do there?"

"Do? I paid him what I lost betting on the Jersey Devils. That's the last time I ever

waste money on the hockey-impaired."

"Where'd he put the money?"

"He took it back to his bedroom. Maybe he stuffed it in his mattress. How would I know?"

"Did Donnie tell you who else he was going to see that day?"

"No. It wasn't a social event. I gave him the bread, and made sure he wrote it down."

I wish I had thought to do that.

Isaacs said he'd seen no one as he left Jernsted's apartment, but if he had, it would have been me. I had gotten there a few minutes before noon and chatted with Donnie for maybe half an hour. The super found him dead before two o'clock.

The next name on my list was Samuel Thorn, and I had a good idea where to find him. So did everybody else: he was the best known busker on the Atlantic City boardwalk.

I walked down the boards for fifteen minutes before I saw a tall, bone-thin black man in white pants and turtleneck. He was juggling two apples and an old fashioned alarm clock.

A few people walked past, but nobody was paying much attention. I put a dollar in the hat that lay in front of him.

"Thanks, man."

"Not much business today?"

"No way. A little cloud cover,

and nobody steps out of the damn casinos."

"You're not a gambler?"

He was tossing apples behind his back, over the shoulder. I'd seen pictures of him in the *Press*, doing just that. "You want to bet on how many times I can catch these things?" he asked cheerfully.

"No. I want to talk about Donnie Jernsted."

The alarm clock hit the boards with a thud. "Damn." Thorn smothered the apples against his chest. "Carson send you? I said I'll have the bread by next week."

I told him the whole sad story. "Hey, I'd like to see the guy who cut Donnie caught. Specially since the poor dude died before he wrote down what I paid."

"What time did you get there?"

"Beats me, man. I don't wear a watch."

"Was it closer to one or two?"

"Hey, if I could keep track of time, I'd still be working for the bus company. You want an apple?"

Herb O'Mara was a retired fisherman. I found him where his wife had said he'd be, sitting on a pier with a juice jar full of worms and a fishing rod.

The April afternoon was

clouding up and I wished I had brought a jacket, but O'Mara sat in his skipper's chair in a short sleeved shirt, a chunky grayhaired man looking happy as a Jersey clam.

"Damned shame about Donnie. I don't know what help I can be. I paid him, and the son of a gun didn't write it down. What else is there to say?"

"Someone took your money," I pointed out. "Took all the money and killed Jernsted before he could record it."

"Yeah, I know. I hope you catch the guy, but I don't hold out much hope." He reeled in his line. "Lost my bait. Fudge."

"Chas Carson tells me you paid up when he asked you to."

"So?"

"So why didn't you complain about paying twice?"

O'Mara smiled, revealing a few crooked teeth and a lot of gaps. "I made a killing last week."

"A killing?"

"Blackjack at the Marina Casino. I had plenty of bucks. So when that giant threatened to bust my nose, I paid him. Easy come, easy went."

He let out more line and shrugged. "If you don't have your health, sonny boy, you don't have squat."

I went to the scene of the crime. That's how desperate I

was. The super told me Donnie's apartment had already been rented out, which I should have guessed. I talked to a few neighbors, all of whom had seen, heard, and smelled nothing on the day of the crime.

It had been a long round of empties, and I decided to treat myself to some food before I went home. There was a diner right across the street from Donnie's old place, your typical Jersey joint with plastic booths and a menu fat as a phone book.

I sat at the counter and ordered a burger deluxe. Gourmet all the way for Marty Crow. When the waitress delivered the cuisine, I asked her if she'd been there the day the guy got killed across the street.

"Sure was," she said. "All those cops and paramedics and stuff. They're lousy tippers, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, it's true. You can quote me." She looked me over. "You a reporter?"

"Private eye." I showed her my license. "We tip terrific."

"Yeah? I wouldn't know. You trying to find out who killed the bookie?"

"That's right. You see anything?"

"Not till the cops arrived."

"Anyone else around that day? The cook?"

"Who, Ali?" She jerked her head toward the darkskinned man behind the tile and glass wall. "He never sees anything. You didn't see anything when that bookie got killed, did you, Ali?"

The cook leaned on the steel counter. He was a short, shrewd-eyed Asian. "The bookie? Oh, a terrible, terrible thing. I saw nothing, though."

The waitress shrugged. "Like I said."

"I think perhaps Juliet saw something. Yes?" He turned back to his grill.

"Juliet?" I repeated.

The waitress looked thoughtful. "Now, that's an idea. Why didn't I think of that? This damned hairnet, it cuts off the circulation to the brain."

"Who is Juliet?"

"Elizabeth Saffestein."

I sat back. "Juliet is Elizabeth Saffestein? Is this diner humor?"

"That's her real name. We call her Juliet because she's hunting for Romeo."

"Uh-huh. And what's Romeo's real name?"

She told me.

Elizabeth Saffestein was maybe twice as old as Shakespeare's tragic teenybopper. She had stringy brown hair and bags under her eyes. I spotted the slight bulge of her belly

only because the waitress had told me she was pregnant.

The magic words—"Pete Romeo"—got me past the three locks on the door, into her apartment on Ventnor.

"You're a private eye? Did Pete send you?"

"I've never met him, Ms. Saffestein, but I heard he was a customer of Donnie Jernsted."

"That awful man." She folded her arms as if there was a sudden chill. "That *vampire*."

I blinked, trying to picture Donnie with a black cloak and fangs. I failed. "Vampire?"

"That awful *gambling*. Sucking people's money and lives away."

"People like Pete Romeo?"

"Pete was one of his victims. That awful man used to take money from him every week."

"And you and Pete fought about it."

"Yes." She looked defiant. "We broke up over his damned gambling."

Or her nagging, I thought. "Pete's out of touch now?"

"He moved and quit his job. He's still in the city, somewhere, but I haven't been able to find him. The only place I knew that he might still be going is that awful bookie."

"So for the last month you've been spending long lunch hours at the diner, looking at

Jernsted's place through the window."

She nodded. "His apartment was the first one on the left. I could see everyone who went in or out through the glass lobby doors. Maybe it sounds stupid, but it was the only connection I had to Pete."

"Sure. Were you there when the bookie got killed?"

"Yes. I left when the police started to arrive."

"Weren't you afraid it might have been Pete getting taken away in the ambulance?"

She looked at me with disbelieving eyes. "Pete dead? Of course not."

Love is amazing. As far as she was concerned, her Pete was superhuman. Bullets couldn't harm him.

"Can't you remember who went in or out that last day?"

"I think so." She frowned. "I saw *you*. Were you one of those gamblers?"

"I was there on behalf of a client," I lied. "Who were the others?"

Her frown turned calculating. "You're a detective. You could find my Pete."

"It's possible. Favor for favor?" Barter is practically the only growth industry left in New Jersey these days.

Elizabeth Saffestein had a good memory but turned out to be rotten at giving descrip-

tions, so it took us a while to work it out. I described a suspect and she told me if she had seen him. It worked: Thorn, Isaacs, and O'Mara all turned up yesses. She had seen Roland duck in and come out with the ledger just before the super arrived and came running out to call the cops. That fit what Chas had told me. I threw in a description of Carson, too, mostly to see if she was just agreeing with everything I said.

"No, he wasn't there. I'm sure those five people are everyone who came out of that man's apartment. Plus the super, but he only stuck his head in and then ran to call the cops."

"Who was first? And forgetting about the giant, who was last?"

"I have no idea. Now will you find my Pete for me?"

"I'll try. Did it ever occur to you to ask Jernsted where Pete was living?"

She nodded. "The little creep wouldn't tell me. He said it was privileged information. Like he was a lawyer or a priest instead of a lousy bookie."

Too bad she hadn't known about Donnie's weakness. If she'd gone in wearing a "Save the Whales" sweatshirt, he might have told her anything she wanted to know.

"When did you talk to Donnie about it?"

"Weeks before he died." She glared at me. "I didn't kill him, Mr. Crow. How would that help me get my Pete back?"

She had me there.

"You're stalling," Chas Carson said that evening. I had the phone tucked against my shoulder as I tried to glue back the arm of my chair.

"These things take time, Chas."

"Time is money. You're wasting one, and you already owe me the other." He hung up without wishing me a nice day.

I put down the chair arm. Threw it down, actually.

O'Mara, Isaacs, Thorn, and Crow. Four gamblers. Four of a kind. One was a murderer, unless there was a joker in the deck.

And then I saw the false shuffle.

Pat Isaacs wasn't happy to see us. "Mr. Carson, what are you doing here? I was just getting ready for bed." He was wearing electric blue pajamas that would have kept me up all night.

"Let us in," said Carson, "or Roland here will break your lease."

Isaacs looked up at Roland, who was resting one baseball

mitt of a hand on the door of the apartment, ready to start pushing.

"Sure, come in." He slipped the chain and stepped back. "What can I do for you?"

Carson sat down in the most comfortable looking chair and turned to me. "You tell it, Crow, and make it good."

"It's not good," I said. "It's perfect." I turned to Isaacs. "You were seen entering Jernsted's apartment."

He blinked. "So what? Of course I was there. I paid Donnie off, remember?"

"Before you went to the jewelry store to start work at noon."

"Exactly."

"But the woman who saw you was on her lunch hour. I called her before we came over here and she told me she got there at ten minutes *after* noon."

"Pat here was at work by then," said Carson. "So he says."

"Sure he was. But he showed me today that he could take a break any time he wanted to. And the jewelry store is only a few blocks from Donnie's place."

Carson nodded. "So he was the first man in, but also the last. He killed Donnie, took back his own money, and the money other people had paid in—"

"Which Donnie hadn't written down yet," I pointed out. "But credit where it's due, I'm sure Pat didn't know that. He was figuring that the cops would be looking for the man who came in after him. He didn't know Roland would carry off the books before the cops arrived."

"You gonna turn me in?" Isaacs' eyes were wide with terror.

"To the cops?" asked Carson. "No, but I'll turn you over to Roland here if you don't give us back all the money right now."

"Okay, okay. Everybody relax." Isaacs raised his hands. "The money's right here. I'll give it back, and we'll call it even. Okay?"

"He's getting off awfully cheap," I complained. I had been holding back a lot from the cops, but I had seen it as a temporary thing. If Carson never turned the guy in, on the other hand . . .

"Shut up," Carson advised.

Pat Isaacs had gone over to one of those entertainment centers, the things that used to be called bookcases when people still read books. He pushed his VCR aside and stuck his hand deep behind it. "Here it is," he said.

When I was in high school, I joined the debate club to get out

of football. I remember the teacher telling us about a bunch of logical fallacies with Latin names; the only one I can remember now is *ad hominem*.

I don't think the teacher mentioned a fallacy called *modus operandi*, but it's a doozy. That's when a guy has committed crimes by one method, so you assume he'll keep using the same method.

Pat Isaacs had killed Donnie with a knife, so none of us expected him to have a gun hidden behind the VCR.

"Here it is," he said again and turned around, pointing an automatic pistol straight at Chas Carson.

We all reacted typically, I guess. Carson stumbled to his feet, let out a strangled yell, and fell backwards over a coffee table. Roland leapt straight at Isaacs, subtle as a Patriot missile.

And I was out the door before the first shot was fired.

I ran two blocks before I found a phone booth. My conscience was saying it was time to tell the cops.

The police didn't raise much of a stink.

Why should they? I gave them a solved murder, complete with star witness Elizabeth Saffestein. I handed them the murderer, ready to be

cuffed, except that he had to go to the hospital first because Roland broke his back.

As an added treat, the cops also collected Roland, slowed down by a bullet in his chest but still lively enough to face a dozen outstanding charges. Chas Carson went to jail for extortion, bookmaking, and being a general blight on the landscape.

So the cops were happy to forgive me for keeping my cards close to my chest until I had gin. They even let me peek at Donnie's address book, where I found a current address for Pete Romeo.

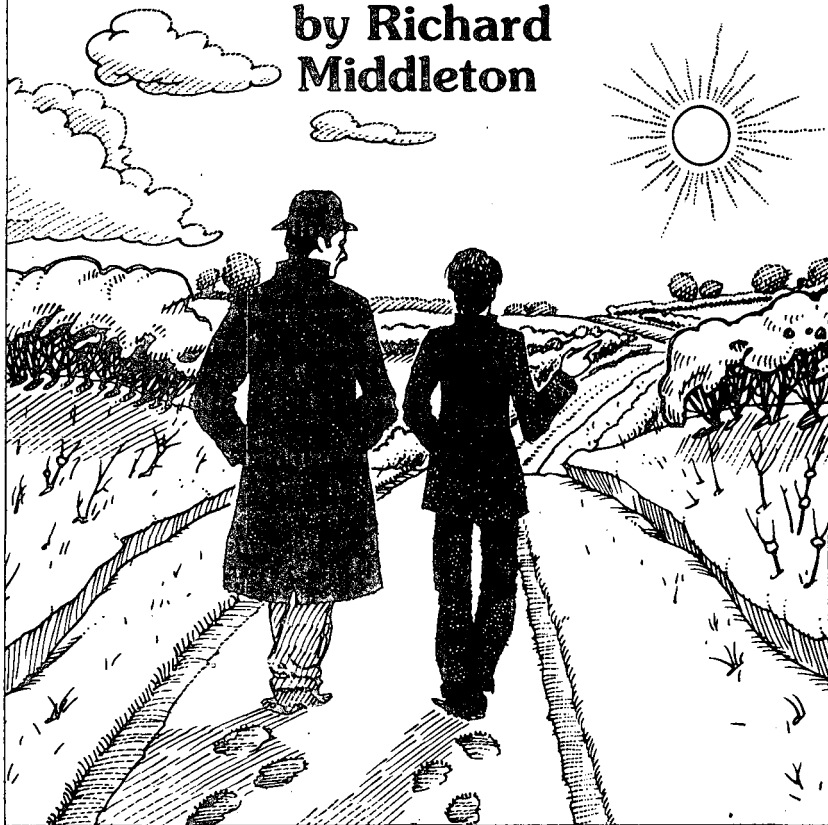
I passed it on to Elizabeth Saffestein, and she must have given him a pretty persuasive pitch, because on May first I was best man at their wedding. They threatened to name the baby after me, but fortunately it was a girl.

Pete Romeo turned out to be an okay guy, with a keen eye for a business opportunity. He jumped into the gap left by Chas and Donnie, and now he's one of Atlantic City's rising young bookies and I'm one of his best customers.

I asked Elizabeth once how she felt about her husband's new business. "I'm not crazy about it, Marty," she said. "But at least he's not gambling any more."

On the Brighton Road

by Richard
Middleton



Slowly the sun had climbed up the hard white downs, till it broke with little of the mysterious ritual of dawn upon a sparkling world of snow. There had been a hard frost during the night, and the birds, who hopped about here and there with scant tolerance of life, left no trace of their passage on the silver pavements. In places the sheltered caverns of the hedges broke the

monotony of the whiteness that had fallen upon the colored earth, and overhead the sky melted from orange to deep blue, from deep blue to a blue so pale that it suggested a thin paper screen rather than illimitable space. Across the level fields there came a cold, silent wind which blew fine dust of snow from the trees, but hardly stirred the crested hedges. Once above the skyline, the sun seemed to climb more quickly, and as it rose higher it began to give out a heat that blended with the keenness of the wind.

It may have been this strange alternation of heat and cold that disturbed the tramp in his dreams, for he struggled for a moment with the snow that covered him, like a man who finds himself twisted uncomfortably in the bedclothes, and then sat up with staring, questioning eyes. Lord! I thought I was in bed, he said to himself as he took in the vacant landscape, and all the while I was out here. He stretched his limbs, and, rising carefully to his feet, shook the snow off his body. As he did so the wind set him shivering, and he knew that his bed had been warm.

Come, I feel pretty fit, he thought. I suppose I am lucky to wake at all in this. Or unlucky—it isn't much of a business to come back to. He looked up and saw the downs shining against the blue like the Alps on a picture postcard. That means another forty miles or so, I suppose, he continued grimly. Lord knows what I did yesterday. Walked till I was done, and now I'm only about twelve miles from Brighton. Damn the snow, damn Brighton, damn everything! The sun crept up higher and higher, and he started walking patiently along the road with his back turned to the hills.

Am I glad or sorry that it was only sleep that took me, glad or sorry, glad or sorry? His thoughts seemed to arrange themselves in a metrical accompaniment to the steady thud of his footsteps, and he hardly sought an answer to his question. It was good enough to walk to.

Presently, when three milestones had loitered past, he overtook a boy who was stooping to light a cigarette. He wore no overcoat, and looked unspeakably fragile against the snow. "Are you on the road, gov'nor?" asked the boy huskily as he passed.

"I think I am," the tramp said.

"Oh! then I'll come a bit of the way with you if you don't walk too fast. It's a bit lonesome walking this time of day." The tramp nodded his head, and the boy started limping along by his side.

"I'm eighteen," he said casually. "I bet you thought I was younger."

"Fifteen, I'd have said."

"You'd have backed a loser. Eighteen last August, and I've been on the road six years. I ran away from home five times when I was a little'un, and the police took me back each time. Very good to me, the police was. Now I haven't got a home to run away from."

"Nor have I," the tramp said calmly.

"Oh, I can see what you are," the boy panted; "you're a gentleman come down. It's harder for you than for me." The tramp glanced down at the limping, feeble figure and lessened his pace.

"I haven't been at it as long as you have," he admitted.

"No, I could tell that by the way you walk. You haven't got tired yet. Perhaps you expect something the other end?"

The tramp reflected for a moment. "I don't know," he said bitterly, "I'm always expecting things."

"You'll grow out of that," the boy commented. "It's warmer in London, but it's harder to come by grub. There isn't much in it really."

"Still, there's the chance of meeting somebody there who will understand—"

"Country people are better," the boy interrupted. "Last night I took a lease of a barn for nothing and slept with the cows, and this morning the farmer routed me out and gave me tea and toke because I was little. Of course, I score there; but in London, soup on the Embankment at night, and all the rest of the time coppers moving you on."

"I dropped by the roadside last night and slept where I fell. It's a wonder I didn't die," the tramp said. The boy looked at him sharply.

"How do you know you didn't?" he said.

"I don't see it," the tramp said, after a pause.

"I tell you," the boy said hoarsely, "people like us can't get away from this sort of thing if we want to. Always hungry and thirsty and dog-tired and walking all the time. And yet if any one offers me a nice home and work my stomach feels sick. Do I look strong? I know I'm little for my age, but I've been knocking about like this for six years, and do you think I'm not dead? I was drowned bathing at Margate, and I was killed by a gypsy with a spike; he knocked my head right in, and twice I was froze like you last night, and a motor cut me down on this very road, and yet I'm walking along here now, walking to London to walk away from it again, because I can't help it. Dead! I tell you we can't get away if we want to."

The boy broke off in a fit of coughing, and the tramp paused while he recovered.

"You'd better borrow my coat for a bit, Tommy," he said, "your cough's pretty bad."

"You go to hell!" the boy said fiercely, puffing at his cigarette; "I'm all right. I was telling you about the road. You haven't got down to it yet, but you'll find out presently. We're all dead, all of us who're on it, and we're all tired, yet somehow we can't leave it. There's nice smells in the summer, dust and hay and the wind smack in your face on a hot day; and it's nice waking up in the wet grass on a fine morning. I don't know, I don't know—" he lurched forward suddenly, and the tramp caught him in his arms.

"I'm sick," the boy whispered—"sick."

The tramp looked up and down the road, but he could see no houses or any sign of help. Yet even as he supported the boy doubtfully in the middle of the road a motorcar suddenly flashed in the middle distance, and came smoothly through the snow.

"What's the trouble?" said the driver quietly as he pulled up. "I'm a doctor." He looked at the boy keenly and listened to his strained breathing.

"Pneumonia," he commented. "I'll give him a lift to the infirmary, and you, too, if you like."

The tramp thought of the workhouse and shook his head. "I'd rather walk," he said.

The boy winked faintly as they lifted him into the car.

"I'll meet you beyond Reigate," he murmured to the tramp. "You'll see." And the car vanished along the white road.

All the morning the tramp splashed through the thawing snow, but at midday he begged some bread at a cottage door and crept into a lonely barn to eat it. It was warm in there, and after his meal he fell asleep among the hay. It was dark when he woke, and started trudging once more through the slushy roads.

Two miles beyond Reigate a figure, a fragile figure, slipped out of the darkness to meet him.

"On the road, guv'nor?" said a husky voice. "Then I'll come a bit of the way with you if you don't walk too fast. It's a bit lonesome walking this time of day."

"But the pneumonia!" cried the tramp, aghast.

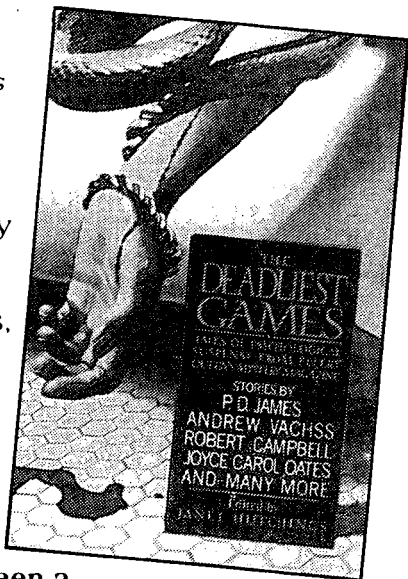
"I died at Crawley this morning," said the boy.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Ellie Haskell is back in form (in fine fettle, in her case) in Dorothy Cannell's latest, **How to Murder Your Mother-in-Law** (Bantam, \$19.95). It seems that the cosy English village of Chitterdon Fells has fallen victim to a plague, not of locusts but of mothers-in-law. Ellie's own grand plan to throw an anniversary party for Mum and Dad Haskell ends in ruin, and not only because her lovely chocolate mousse was accidentally made with their gardener's flavored laxative. It's worse than that. The evening ends with Ben's parents actually separating, and Ben's mum settling into Merlin's Court with all the appearance of making her only son's (and Ellie's) home her own. This drives Ellie around the bend and down to the pub, where she shares her troubles with three other haunted village women with similar tales of woe. Their camaraderie and a couple of drinks lead them to giddily plot the various demises of their hubbies' moms. The next day finds Ellie with a only twinge of guilt and a mild hangover . . . until the accidents begin. And the missing Barbie dolls turn up with pins in them. And the blackmail call comes. Get the picture? The characters volley drawing-room banter and indulge in Keystone-comedy antics, while the soft-hearted Ellie frazzles before our eyes, quipping all the while at a furious pace. Cannell loftily ignores anything that will drag her novels down to the hard ground of verisimilitude—and aren't we ever glad!

Nicholas Meyer (*The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*) has unearthed yet another heretofore unpublished manuscript by the late Dr. John H. Watson, esteemed biographer of Sherlock Holmes. What

a break for Meyer, not to mention Holmes fans. In **The Canary Trainer** (Norton, \$21), Watson is visiting Holmes in his retirement, patiently listening to Holmes drone on (pun intended) about bee-raising, when his old friend unexpectedly rewards him with a narration dating from Holmes's missing years (after Reichenbach Falls). The year is 1891; the place is Paris. Holmes finds himself reveling in the freedom of his new identity as Monsieur Sigerson, and is delighted to find a job as violinist for the Paris Opera. The theater is amazing; its numerous sub-levels include stage traps and workshops, a stable, even a rumor of a subterranean lake. The *artistes* also brag of their resident ghost, whom they swear they've heard playing the organ and occasionally singing in the most beautiful voice. Only the theater managers are aware that the "ghost" makes demands in exchange for his benevolent protection. And Holmes, who's already struggling with protecting his identity as well as handling the disconcerting reappearance in his life of Irene Adler, finds himself facing a formidable enemy. If this sounds familiar to you, I'm not surprised. Meyer, however, has a few surprises in store, and this Holmes fan dearly hopes that the lucky Meyer will stumble across further chapters in Sigerson's life.

Patricia Houck Sprinkle's third Sheila Travis mystery is **Murder on Peachtree Street**, and it's peachy. Sheila has been hired by a Japanese firm with holdings in her hometown of Atlanta. Representing the parent company at a press party for one of those subsidiaries, she meets the staff of the firm's new TV series. She already knows the charismatic Dean Anderson, a big-time TV journalist who's been hired to spearhead this new project, dating back to when she was an embassy wife, not the widow she is now. If there seems to be more tension than the usual interoffice politics, Sheila stubbornly refuses to acknowledge it. "I have not come to Atlanta to be a detective," she firmly reminded her genteel Aunt Mary only days earlier. Famous last words. Sheila is a likeable and mature protagonist, while her tiny Aunt Mary makes a spunky sidekick. (Worldwide, \$3.99)

Martin Cruz Smith's Inspector Arkady Renko (*Gorky Park*) is back from his Siberian exile in **Red Square** (Ballantine, \$5.99). Officially reinstalled in his former post as a Moscow homicide investigator, he patrols broken, littered streets and navigates gang-controlled sectors, wearily leading his politically mismatched crime team, returning nightly to a spartan apartment and an empty larder. His life resembles a dark, futuristic nightmare. Then Renko discovers a tenuous lifeline: the voice of his great love,

defector Irina Asanova, who broadcasts nightly from Munich over Radio Liberty. *Red Square* combines the mind twists of a spy thriller, the non-stop action of an adventure novel, and the whodunit elements of a P.I. tale, throwing in a dash of romance for good measure. Cruz Smith paints a terrifying portrait of modern Russia, weaving recent political events and historical detail seamlessly into his plot. Fans of John le Carré should dash out to their bookstores for *Red Square* before another moment is lost.

Jeffery Deaver has twice been nominated for an Edgar. In his latest, **Praying for Sleep** (Viking, \$21.95), he turns his hand from mysteries to a thriller. Lis Atcheson was able to identify Michael Hrubek as the brutal Indian Leap State Park murderer who killed two of her friends, and a jury condemned him to a hospital for the criminally insane. As the months pass, Lis makes her peace with her husband, Owen, and then loses both parents. As for Michael, he has only one thing on his paranoid-schizophrenic mind: to get to Lis. While she nervously awaits the arrival of her estranged sister so they can settle the estate, Hrubek manages to escape. Hrubek must elude a hired tracker, his psychiatrist, an entire police force, and her husband Owen before he gets to Lis. Yet it is Lis's journey to self-knowledge that is, finally, the most terrifying one. Deaver writes so graphically that it's almost painful, taking us into the minds of his characters, including Michael. The finale is a shocker, too.

Death of the Office Witch (Otto Penzler Books, \$20) is Marlys Millhiser's second Charlie Greene mystery, and it's a dilly. Charlie is a single mom with a high-stress job (talent agent), a Malibu mortgage (outrageous), and a high-strung teenage daughter (also outrageous). She also has a wicked wit, and a reputation (totally unfounded, she swears) for being psychic. It is uncanny that when their troublemaking receptionist was missing from her post, Charlie thought she heard Gloria's voice issuing from a garbage can. When Gloria finally turns up, even Charlie has to wonder: what are the odds? But the police insist that she try to tap her debatable psychic gifts to catch the killer. And even though Charlie is skeptical, the murderer isn't, which plops her in the middle of a dangerous brew. Millhiser puts her punchy heroine in an offbeat plot and runs with it. The result is a fresh and very funny new face on the female sleuth scene.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



It is rare that one can accuse Hollywood of seizing a perfectly good book and taking the sex and violence out. But that's exactly how director Alan Pakula has adapted John Grisham's **The Pelican Brief** into a big screen extravaganza. It's something of a relief to see a big budget thriller that's suitable for suspense fans of any age. And Grisham's fast-paced Capital caper isn't harmed by Pakula's approach.

The Pelican Brief is the story of Darby Shaw (Julia Roberts), a New Orleans law student caught in a web of intrigue after she writes a speculative legal brief to explain the assassinations of not one but two Supreme Court justices.

Initially, hers is an unbelievable theory: the audience doesn't believe it, Shaw doesn't even believe it. But when her near and dear ones start get-

ting knocked off, she understands that her law student musings about the rich and powerful might contain more than a grain of truth. More important, she realizes she may be the next target.

At that terrible moment, Shaw turns from law student to fugitive on the run. We follow her through the colorful streets of New Orleans, so warm and inviting before but now just a place full of crowds where she tries to get lost.

The filmmaking is noteworthy, and the movie would have benefited from more footage in this exotic city where much of the intrigue occurs.

Glamorous Roberts does a credible job of turning herself into an anonymous figure. The chase scenes could have used a more convincing edge, however. What should be a gripping part of the story is not likely

to find most viewers perched on the edge of their seats.

Fortunately, the tension is not missing for long. When Roberts teams up with newspaper reporter Gray Grantham, played by Denzel Washington, the story catches fire. The duo track down the real story of the Supreme Court murders with a vengeance that should leave Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein drooling with envy. If only Oliver Stone had had a pair like these two in his *JFK*.

Although the teamwork of Roberts and Washington ignites the plot, what never catches fire are the flames of passion between this very talented acting couple. The romantic innuendos are left to the audience's imagination, one difference from the book.

And although this movie brims with murder and violence, it is only by implication. To its credit, there is no gratuitous violence in the film. All the audience ever sees of a series of unfortunate events are silhouettes and spattered blood. Popular filmmakers take note.

Viewers who have read the novel will find the movie easier to understand than those who haven't. In the book, it is difficult to identify all the villains and their varying agendas. On the screen, it becomes nearly impossible.

When it comes to details, the reader of the book also has an advantage over the moviegoer. For example, while the audience is left to wonder why FBI counsel Gavin Verheek studies his paunch in the mirror for an interminably long time, the reader knows it's because he's lied about his weight to the lovely Darby. And while Roberts' many wardrobe changes will leave just as many viewers wondering when our heroine could possibly have time to shop, the reader will know that she must discard her old outfits and buy new ones while on the run.

Despite these gaps, the combination of solid acting and a good story make this an energetic yarn in which there's little worth quibbling over.

If only the mystery were played out better, though. Pakula, who brought to the screen *All the President's Men*, the greatest story to-date of political scandal, hasn't managed to duplicate his earlier effort in this fictional tale.

But like the recent movie of Grisham's earlier book *The Firm*, directed by Sidney Pollack, *The Pelican Brief* is an entertaining and diverting peek into the corridors of power. Given today's standards in Hollywood, that's a high compliment.

THE STORY THAT WON



The Mid-December Mysterious Todd H. Latoski of Longwood, Charles Richard Laing of Newark, Jr., of Mulberry, Florida; William nia; Josephine Gonzales of Scar-Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Rosa-Brunswick, Canada; James Sadlemyer of Odessa, Saskatchewan, Canada; Beverly Appleby of St. Louis, Missouri; John A. Hall of Atwater, California; and R. Frederick Becker of Grimesland, North Carolina.

Photograph contest was won by Florida. Honorable mentions go to New Jersey; Charles D. Bowers, F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Art lie Ferris of Saint John, New

lie Ferris of Saint John, New

"MOMMY DEAREST" by Todd H. Latoski

"We caught him carrying the portrait into his house."

The captain smashed his cigarette in the ashtray and looked at the young boy. "Why'd you do it, boy? Sixteen paintings in the past three months. *Why?*"

The boy sat in silence and stared at the captain. The captain slammed his fist down and looked back at the lieutenant who had brought the boy to the precinct. "Have the boy's parents been contacted?"

"Well," the lieutenant began, "we can't seem to locate them. We tried his house, but no one is there."

Turning back to the boy, the captain gritted his teeth. "This is your last chance. Why'd you steal those paintings? What reason could you have for sixteen paintings of motherly women?"

The boy remained despondent. Frustrated, the captain grabbed the papers lying on the table and thrust them in front of the boy.

"Here! If you won't say anything, at least sign your name to this form so we can all get out of here!"

The boy calmly took the pen offered by the lieutenant and signed his name. As the lieutenant then led him out of the room, the captain looked at the signature and shook his head.

"Norman Bates, you are one weird kid!"

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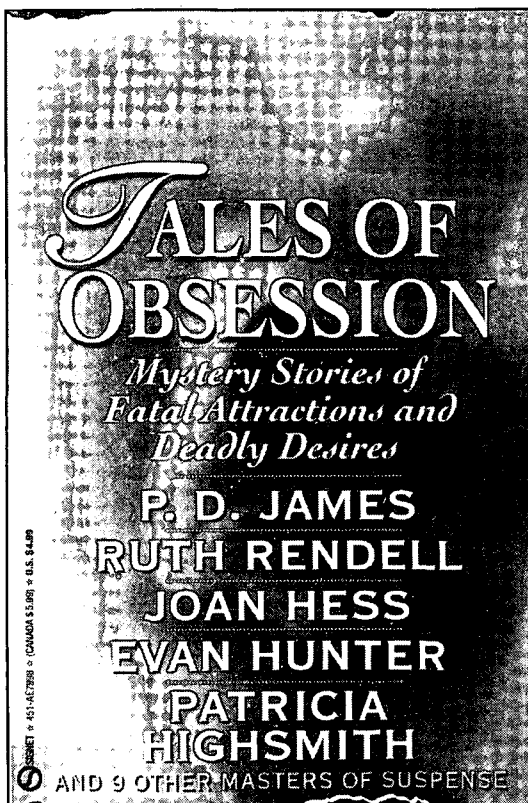
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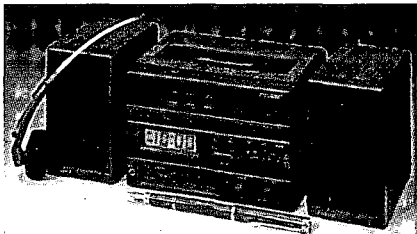
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